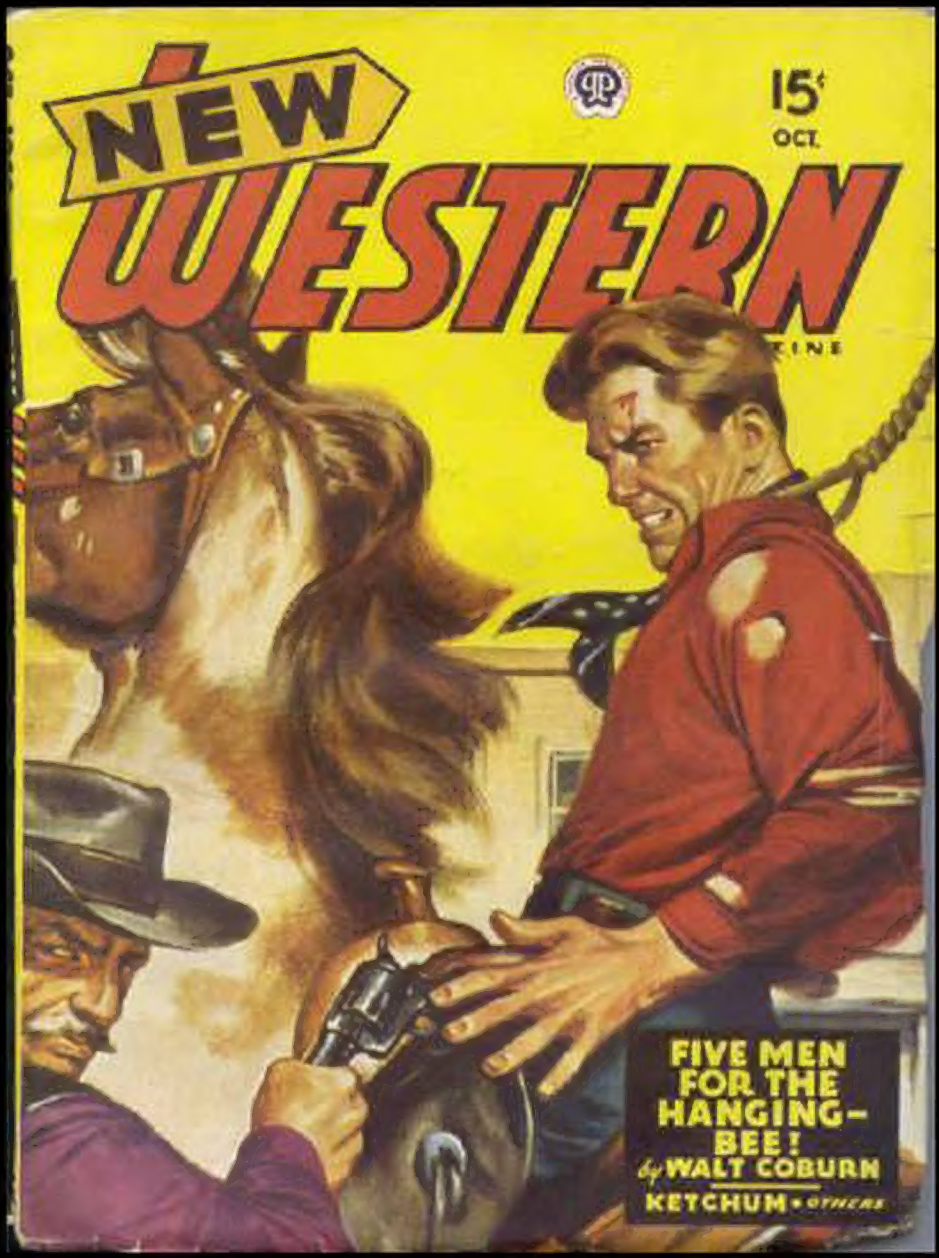
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ALL STORIES NEW
NO REPRINTS

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The RIPROARIOUS WEST

BY Robbins and Farren

"I kin throw my saddle on anything that has four legs!" was the oft-repeated boast of Tom Gunnison, Tucson's top-hand bronc buster. Arizona cattlemen got mighty tired of hearing him brag and passed the word around that there was a critter in Seth McGill's corral that no cowpoke alive had ever succeeded in saddling. Roaring, the great Gunnison snapped up the challenge: "I'll not only saddle 'im, I'll ride 'im to church!" A grinning crowd accompanied him to the corral. The bronc tamer braced himself; Seth McGill opened the chute, and out plunged the critter that couldn't be saddled—a tiny, three-week-old kitten!

Nick "Bull of the Woods" Fryer, early California wagon freighter, made a record-breaking run between Marysville and Downiesville in July, 1850, carrying several casks of gin. As he rattled triumphantly into the home stretch, he met Pete Yore, Downiesville saloonkeeper. When Pete heard about the Bull's speedy run, he bellowed, "Well, in that case, set 'em up!" Bull complied. A few hours and several gallons later, the hilarious party broke up. Giggling, Pete insisted on refilling the empty casks with water. "Who'sh thish likker consigned to, anyway?" he queried. "Be sure to give 'im my thanksh." The Bull wiped his mouth solemnly. "Much obleeged, Pete," he said thickly. "It was yourn."

Forty-niner Bigby Folsom, who later found the fabulous Rainbow Mine near Sacramento, was returning from a shindig near Georgetown, California, one dark night in 1850. Head in the air, he was singing merrily when he stumbled into an open mine shaft. Hurtling downward, he clutched and clung to a protruding rock. For hours he hung there, praying and shouting, but no help arrived. His fingers were slowly but surely slipping off the rock. Finally, exhausted, he closed his eyes, muttered a final prayer, and dropped—six inches.

When Matthew Dawson, a Pennsylvania Quaker, took up a homestead just west of Omaha, he had a hard time remembering that he was a man of peace. Hostile ranchers cut his fences, stampeded his livestock and ran their cattle across his fields. All these trials he bore with devout fortitude, but when he caught a rider about to set fire to his hayrick, his patience ended. Seizing his ancient hunting rifle, he pointed it at the invader. "Friend," he called quaverlingly, "I would not harm thee for all the world, but thou standest where I am about to shoot!"

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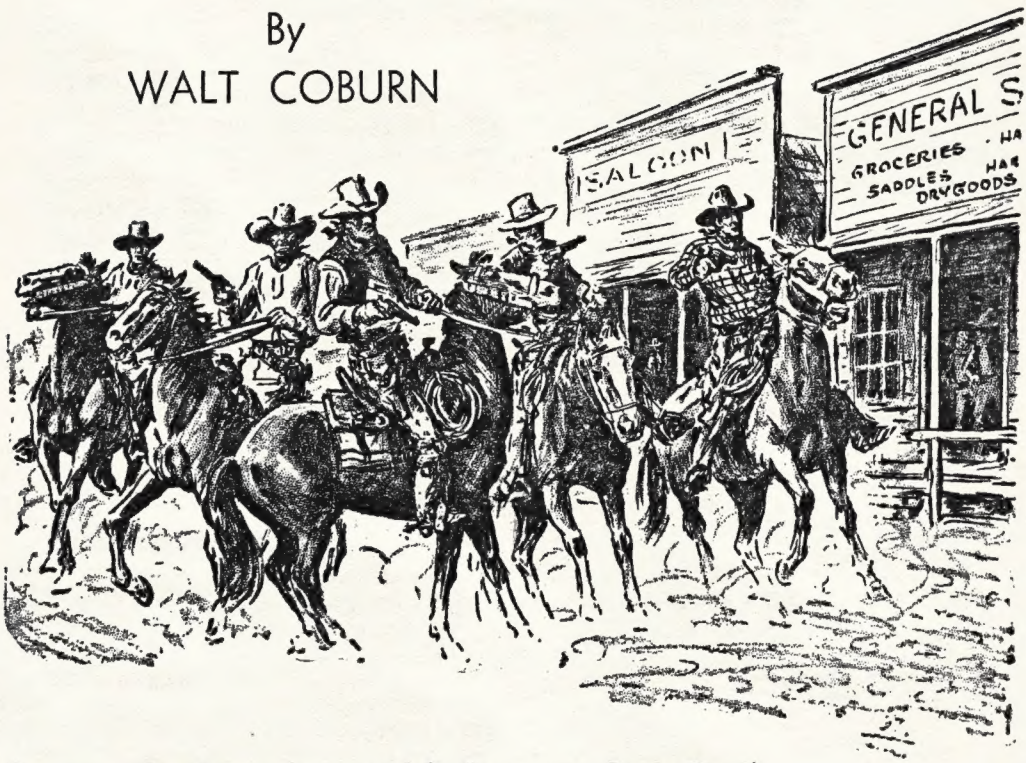


Because of a doomed renegade's lie, young Steve Doyle was spared to serve as undertaker for his five strangled saddlemates, using gallows steps for headboards. . . . But the thirteenth step he carried back to Trail City—a grisly tombstone for the damned that needed upon it only a bullet-written epitaph, and beneath it—the hooded head of the nightshirt Vigilantes' boss killer!

CHAPTER ONE

The Thirteenth Step

WHEN the so-called Vigilantes around Trail City, Montana, wiped out the road-agents and cattle rustlers, they left alive two members of that lawless gang.

Steve Doyle's name was on the Vigilante blacklist. But at his trial it was pointed out that Steve Doyle was hardly more than a beardless youth who had somehow fallen into bad company and that he was too young to have taken much of an active part in such evil activities as robbing stagecoaches, high-grading the sluice boxes of placer miners, rustling cattle or stealing horses. He was sort of chore boy, horse wrangler and hired man around Clem Bartlett's Steamboat Landing ranch on the Missouri River.

The name of Manton Shanley was not on the Vigilante blacklist. In fact, the name was scarcely known around Trail City, although the man himself was known to every man and woman in that cowtown and placer camp of Trail City, Montana Territory. He

HANGING-BEE!

Shanley grabbed Steve Doyle up so fast that the Purcells didn't quite realize what was happening.

played the piano at the Honkytonk and was known only as the Professor. And even so, had they suspected the man whose education at law school had furnished the brains for the planning of road agent activities, the Vigilantes might have hesitated and balked at hanging him.

Piano players like the Professor were hard to find.

When the Professor was in one of his nostalgic, brooding moods he would sit there all night at his piano below the stage platform and play. His long fingers had a magician's touch and music never written

flowed forth as if by some conjurer's spell. Men, hardened and tough and calloused of heart, would sit at the tables spellbound, staring vacantly into their own partly forgotten pasts. They would come there again and again to drink the forty-rod whiskey that deadened pain and mellowed the homesickness that crept deep inside their hearts while they listened to the Professor.

It was almost dawn outside, and the Honkytonk was deserted, chairs piled on top of the empty tables by the bleary-eyed swamper. The one bartender left on shift was polishing glasses, placing them on the back bar and lining them up with a smooth round stick like a schoolmarm's pointer. One human derelict sat alone at a table near the piano. And the Professor sat there, like a man under some strange evil spell, his long black-nailed fingers caressing the piano keys with a touch so soft yet tense that the music sounded like the moaning of restless earth-bound souls in torture.

Tall, lean, unkempt, his hair prematurely white, with bitter lines etched around the corners of his mouth, his pale blue eyes were glazed now as the eyes of a blind man. The Professor was not yet thirty years old. But Fate had filled those thirty years with experience that had left the man ravaged. And in the ugly gray shadow and dying lamplight of the deserted Honkytonk his tortured soul found outlet at the battered piano.

The human derelict who made up the sole audience for the strange, bitter, sometimes dirge-like music of the Professor, was partly drunk. His white shirt was soiled and spotted by ink stains and spilled whiskey. His bushy hair was snow white and he was apple-cheeked as a schoolboy. From under bushy brows glinted a pair of eyes as blue as a summer sky. No amount of Trail City's potent forty-rod whiskey could dim or blear their brightness. He was Greely Mann, publisher, at irregular intervals, of a newspaper he called the *Trail City Banner*.

Mann slumped there now in his barroom chair with his eyes closed and an empty glass in one lax, ink-stained hand. An almost empty quart bottle stood on the round-topped table in front of him. He was motionless. He looked dead drunk, but tears slid from under his closed eyelids and coursed unchecked down through the white stubble on his apple cheeks. Greely Mann was not dead to the world.

Steve Doyle came in out of the gray dawn and the short swinging batwings creaked faintly behind him. He walked, spurs jingling faintly, with the short stiff-legged gait of a cowboy, threading his course between the deserted tables, with no more than a brief glance cut at Greely Mann. Then he was standing beside the piano.

"Get away." The Professor's eyes were bleak. They did not look up, even for the fraction of an instant. "Go away from me."

The Professor's lips did not move. The words came from behind clamped teeth. A limp brown cigarette hung from a corner of his mouth. The Professor's voice came through lips that never moved. Convicts in prison, denied of their freedom of speech, soon learn to talk like that. The knack of it is not too easily forgotten.

Steve Doyle stood there, tall and lean. His tanned face with its blunt nose and jaw was beardless. He pushed a dust-powdered hat back on his head with one thumb. The hat left a red mark across his white forehead. His wiry black hair was sweat-matted and dusty. From under heavy black brows his eyes were as coldly gray as polished steel. He spoke quietly.

"You wasn't there. They're dead. All five. Hanged yesterday. I thought you might want to know how they died."

"You're dangerous." The Professor's voice was toneless. His lips never moved. "Go away."

"They rode up on us just before daybreak." Steve Doyle leaned against the upright piano. "Without warnin' of any kind. Fetched us flat-footed. Without a shot fired. There was too many of 'em. They had on hoods made outa pillow cases, and holes cut in for eyeholes. White sheets. Like Ku Kluxers down in the deep South. And when they had us hogtied, all but the leaders kinda dropped back. And after a while I commenced to read their brands and ear marks in spite of them Ku Kluxer white sheets. Study a man and you kin kinda recognize. By the way a man will stand sorta hipshot. By the shape of a man's hands that hold a pair of six-shooters. By a run-over boot heel. Or by a pair of silver-mounted spurs one of 'em forgot to take off. Before they got done with their kanga-

roo court I knowed the four main ramrods of them night riders that calls theirselves the Vigilantes."

THE Professor did not look up. The expression on the gray poker-face never changed. The soggy brown paper cigarette hung limp in a corner of the thin lips that never moved. Only his long fingers moved of their own accord across the black and ivory keyboard and his music was soft and minor-keyed like a funeral dirge.

"They tried us and found us guilty," Steve Doyle leaned idly against the end of the piano. "And sentenced us to hang by the neck until dead."

"There's a platform built like a dock on the river bank. They used to load buffalo hides there when the river steamboats tied up for cordwood fuel. The platform was the right height, they decided, for a gallows. They could throw the ropes up over the big limb of an old cottonwood that shades the loadin' platform. And they tore away what was left of the old ramp there and made a staircase with thirteen steps up from the ground to the gallows platform. They seemed right proud of their carpenter work."

Greely Mann never moved in his chair. But his eyes opened a little and the nostalgic tears dried quickly on his apple cheeks.

"The two Harbinson brothers," Steve Doyle's voice went quietly on with the grim recital, "didn't finish as tough as they'd started and traveled. But their blubberin' got choked off almighty sudden when they was pushed off the edge of the platform. Their big hulks jerked the slack in the ropes and they kicked the air. Their legs doubled up like the blade of a jack-knife. Joe Harbinson's neck broke when he hit the end of the slack. It popped like a cap pistol. Sam Harbison was more rubber-necked. And he had to strangle slow. His face got kinda purple and his tongue swole till it filled his gapin' mouth and it stuck between them buck teeth of Sam's like a hunk of old black felt.

The Professor's long fingers kept moving, spreading like claws that tore with suppressed fury at the piano keys. The music sent a shiver along the spine of young nineteen-year-old Steve Doyle. Some of the healthy color drained from his tanned lean face. But his voice never lost its quiet tone and his eyes were like polished steel.

"Big Tex stood there on the scaffold and cussed them Vigilantes with all the names he could think up and he cussed them in Mexican when he run low on his own language. He was still cussin' 'em when they pushed him off the edge of the platform. Big Tex had watched Sam Harbinson strangle and choke to death and he jumped. Before they could shove him, that big Texan kinda dove off. I thought for a second he'd bust the rope, he hit the end that hard. It throwed him like you'd rope and throw a bronc. Busted his neck so hard it almost tore his head off."

Steve Doyle grinned faintly. A hard-lipped, ugly grin.

"When it come Monte's turn, I'd of gambled on that tinhorn showin' the white feather. But he never weakened. He was poker faced and he played his losin' hand like a man that held all aces.

" 'It's your jackpot,' he told them Vigilantes. 'Rake it in.' And he stepped off that gallows platform with his boots polished. The cheroot he held half smoked in his teeth was bit off and it flipped through the gray light like a roman candle, hittin' the dark river and goin' out with Monte's life. There was no tinhorn in Monte when the big showdown came."

Greely Mann did not move in his chair. But his eyes were a hard bright blue as he veiled them under half-shut lids.

"Then it come my turn," said Steve Doyle. "And I was so scared inside I could hardly breathe. My legs was weak-kneed and I was sweatin' and I didn't think they'd hold me up while I climbed them thirteen steps. There was blood poundin' against my ear drums so when I heard Clem Bartlett talkin' his voice sounded far off. Then I commenced to listen.

"I heard Clem Bartlett tell what I reckon was his first big lie under oath. Clem Bartlett told them Vigilantes I was innocent of any kind of crime. He told them not to hang me because I was only an innocent wild kind of kid that got throwed into older tough company. I believe there is a God up yonder who will wipe the slate of Clem Bartlett clean of that lie he swore to under Bible oath. They let me live."

Steve Doyle's eyes had lost something of their steely hardness. But it came back now.

"No need to tell how big Clem Bartlett died. He walked up them thirteen steps and they put the rope with its hangman's knot around his neck. He stood there straight-backed. His face was granite and his iron gray hair made him look almighty handsome. His eyes looked down deep into mine and his courage gave me guts enough to straighten up and shake off the fear and hate and grief that was tearin' me inside like panther claws. Then big Clem Bartlett walked off the scaffold platform and his two hundred pounds jerked the slack in the rope and broke his neck. Clem Bartlett was the only one of the five them Vigilantes hung that didn't kick a lick at the end of the rope. It was like he was dead before the noose tightened around his neck. Let them night-ridin' Ku Kluxer Vigilantes name it. . . . Steve Doyle and God Almighty know it was murder."

Young Steve Doyle's voice broke for the first time. Then he went on talking in that strange monotone.

"The Vigilantes turned me loose. They told me to leave those five men hangin' there and get on my horse and ride. To quit the country. And they rode off as quick as they had come. It was just sunrise.

"I dug five graves, and laid out five bed tarps. I cut them five men down and buried 'em there in their tarps on the bank of the Missouri River. I ripped off five of the gallows steps. I built me a fire and heated brandin' irons and burned each man's name on one of them steps and used 'em for headboards to mark the graves of those five men."

Steve Doyle had carried a flat package wrapped in old canvas. And he had laid it on top of the piano. He reached for it now and he slowly unwrapped the canvas from a rough board about two feet long and a foot wide.

"This," he said flatly, "is the thirteenth step to the gallows."

The Professor played only by ear. There was no sheet music on the piano's music rack. Steve Doyle tossed the canvas aside. And he placed the board there on the music rack.

Deeply burned black into the board was: Manton Shanley—Attorney At Law.

"It's time," said Steve Doyle quietly, "that you hung out your shingle."

THE Professor's pale eyes stared at it as a man might stare at a coiled rattlesnake. His music crashed to a wild discordant finale.

"I'm not runnin' away," said Steve Doyle. "I'm not quittin' Montana Territory. I'll do my own fightin'. But I'm goin' to need a lawyer."

Steve Doyle walked away from the piano where the Professor sat like a man in a trance. He threaded his way between the empty tables and past the bleary-eyed swamper who was cadging a drink from the white-aproned bartender. He went out through the swinging batwings to the hitchrack where his horse was standing. Overhead the sky was gray as lead.

Steve had not paid any attention to the man slumped in the barroom chair. He had never seen, never heard, of Greely Mann or the *Trail City Banner*. He picked up his bridle reins and was about to mount when he heard his name called in a husky voice. He turned to stare at the bushy-haired, apple-cheeked, paunchy little man in soiled, ink-stained clothes.

"They'll be hounding you by sunrise, Steve Doyle. When you have taken care of your horses, come to my office at the *Trail City Banner*. You'll be as safe there as anywhere. The power of the press will be behind you. You have just given me a graphic account, an eye-witness word picture, of the greatest story ever to come out of the Territory of Montana. It shall be broadcast far and wide and if the people of this country don't rise and demand a real law force instead of a night-shirted one, then my name isn't Greely Mann!

Greely Mann drained the last of the forty-rod whiskey and smashed the empty bottle against the outer wall of the Honkytonk.

There had been a time when a great public had read every word printed under the by-line of Greely Mann. That was until his editorial lance had struck the stone wall of a powerful and crooked political regime—and shattered. Beaten and disgraced he had been thrown into prison to be forgotten.

Now Greely Mann was breathing again the sweet air of freedom. That it was steeped in the fumes of frontier whiskey, sweetend, rather than tainted this wild free air. It thickened the printer's ink in his newspaperman's veins. He had his hours

of nostalgia when he would sit all night and listen to the music the Professor conjured up out of the battered Honkytonk piano. And he had his days in the sun and his nights under the stars.

As for Steve Doyle, he saw at first glance a fat little maudlin drunk. Then he looked into the clear blue eyes of the man, and he reached out and gripped the ink-stained hand, feeling its hard grip.

"Put up your horse," Mann said. "Then come to my office. Let Manton Shanley shape his own destiny. As for Greely Mann and his *Trail City Banner*—you have given me a mighty weapon. Your story will go into the mail sack and out across the prairie by stagecoach, thence by rail to the great cities. Copies will reach the editorial offices of this nation's greatest newspapers.

"But we tarry here too long. Get going, Steve. And it would not be amiss if you should fetch a crock of forty-rod along to the office of the *Trail City Banner*. This is not work that can be done on water. There's nothing like mixing good likker with printer's ink and sweat and perhaps, my young friend, blood! Make haste!"

Greely Mann all but trotted on. Steve Doyle grinned, watching his short rotund figure disappear. Then he mounted his horse and rode down the deserted street to the feed and livery barn.

Steve Doyle had not counted on Greely Mann. That partly drunk little newspaperman could ruin everything. But on the other hand. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Death Hangs Out a Shingle

THE sod-roofed log cabin that housed the *Trail City Banner* was about twenty-five feet wide and three times as long. The cabin was divided into three sections by log partitions, with a doorway cut through each partition. The front end was given over to the *Banner's* equipment—a printing press, a big table that served as a desk, and bales of paper stacked in a corner.

The middle room was where Greely Mann slept and it was no dirtier and no cleaner than the average bunkhouse. Some simple furniture and a battered old Saratoga trunk served to furnish the room.

The kitchen was clean and its shelves and cupboards were well stocked. A lean-to at the back had a wash basin and roller towel, a pail of water and a dipper.

It was the oldest building in Trail City and it had been the stage station. Greely Mann was as proud of it as a king of his castle.

Greely Man was working feverishly setting type when Steve Doyle came in by way of the front door. He motioned vaguely and told Steve to put on the coffee pot and get himself some breakfast. Steve set a jug of whiskey on the cluttered-up desk and went on through the bedroom into the kitchen. He laid the saddle carbine he'd carried in the crook of his arm on the empty bunk, but he kept his six-shooter belted on. He built a fire in the cook-stove and set about getting breakfast. He had the coffee started when Greely Mann came in. He had washed up and looked like Santa Claus without a white beard. He straddled a kitchen chair and his bright blue eyes watched the young cowhand.

"I need facts, Steve," he said. "I have a smattering. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Half-truths worse than nothing. Let me spread out what cards I hold. Tell me what to discard, what to hold. And then you can deal me what I need to fill my hand so it won't lose. I'm drawing to fill an inside flush. You follow me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Greely to you, son." His smile was cherubic. He held up an ink-stained, stubby-fingered hand, thumb and fingers spread.

"These are the five men you saw hanged, Steve." The forefinger of his other hand touched the little finger of the hand he held up.

"We'll take Monte, first. I was acquainted with that dapper card dealer and knew him better than I knew the others. He was a gambler. Called a tinhorn by some. He dealt a monte game at the Honkytonk. He was in a position to know certain facts that would be of value to some road agent who made a practice of holding up the stagecoach at irregular intervals. And to use an old circus term, Monte 'doubled in brass' to assist in the actual stagecoach holdups when two men were needed for that dangerous job. That takes care of Monte. Right, Steve?"

Steve Doyle's gray eyes hardened. He

looked older than his nineteen years. He stared into the eyes of the newspaper man.

"Get this right, Steve," said Greely Mann, biting off each word, "I'm not asking you to turn informer. I have most of the facts. Perhaps I know far more than you do concerning the activities of those men you saw murdered on a so-called Vigilante gallows. Those men are dead. I'm signing my own death warrant when I put my Greely Mann by-line on the story. What you tell me in confidence cannot harm the dead. But, by Judas, it may serve to hang legally a pack of white-robed, pillow-cased murderers! You have the guts to stand your ground. You must have the courage of your own convictions. Monte played his hand out."

"That's right," said Steve Doyle, "I'll string along with you. You got Monte pegged right."

"Long Tex," Greely Mann said, "was the lone road agent. He played it lone-handed for the most part. I was on the stagecoach once when he held it up. There was something damned heroic about it. Lawless—but clean-cut and unafraid. And behind it there must have been an undying hatred against someone or something. He never robbed a passenger—only the strong box. He let Monte help him only when he needed a man to help him on a clean fast getaway. So Long Tex was a road agent. He lived and died according to his lights."

"That's right, Greely."

"Joe and Sam Harbinson had the Double H ranch across the river from the Steamboat Landing Ranch. They were big and tough and no more dihonest than other cattlemen until cattle rustlers began whittling on their herd. The Harbinson boys fought fire by building a rustler backfire. Then they got bold and reckless and spread in all directions, until the cattle country termed the two Harbinson brothers the worst cattle rustlers in Montana Territory. That's a broad statement that takes in too much cow country and discounts too many cowmen who swing a hungry loop. I regret that Joe and Sam Harbinson lacked guts when their time came to quit their last range here on earth. I've watched the Harbinson boys paint the town of Trail City red. And I recall a remark I overheard Clem Bartlett make as we stood by, watching Joe and Sam Harbinson buck their horses down the street and out of town, shooting right and left."

" 'The Harbinson boys,' " said Clem Bartlett, 'are tough enough till somebody calls their bluff. Then they'll coyote.' "

Steve Doyle nodded. "Clem Bartlett never trusted Joe and Sam Harbinson and he would have nothin' to do with them and their cattle rustlin'. Clem knowed the Harbinsons would git him in bad, and they did. They throwed a drove of stolen cattle acrost the river onto Clem's range the evenin' before the night riders came down outa the badlands and rode up on us at Steamboat Landin' Ranch. The stolen cattle was there for proof against Clem Bartlett."

"Which," said Greely Mann nodding his bushy white head, "brings us to Clem Bartlett, alleged leader of the road agent and cattle rustler and horse thief gang."

"A damned, dirty, black lie!" Steve Doyle's eyes were slits of steel. "Clem Bartlett never branded another cowman's critter or owned a stolen horse. He never took a dollar from Long Tex or Monte. Clem Bartlett was an honest cowman. His Steamboat Landing Ranch was clean as a hound's tooth. Somewheres along his back trail Clem Bartlett had made some kind of of a mistake and paid the penalty. He was too big hearted to turn anybody away from his Steamboat Landin' Ranch. He never could see the bad in anyone. But he'd strain his eyes lookin' for the good streak in a man—or in a wild damnfool kid. I know. I was ridin' a wild trail to Hell when I crossed the river one night and Clem Bartlett patched the bullet rips in my no-good hide and give me a job. I'm a range orphan. I don't have any memory of a father or mother. I've bin driftin' since I was old enough to fork a pony. I don't even know how old I am. Clem figgered me to be seventeen when I come there. That's two years ago.

"Clem Bartlett was the only man that ever taken the trouble to knock the outlaw outa my hide and set me right about things I had figgered wrong. He had an old Bible there and he gave it to me and told me to read it from cover to cover. He told me to learn the Ten Commandments, and to live accordin' to 'em as best I could. And he laid down a few laws of his own that he called a man's code of honor, say-

in' if I lived up to them few rules I wouldn't need to worry about the man-made laws that was too many and too confusin' and too easy twisted around to be much good in a frontier country."

STEVE DOYLE reached inside his shirt and took out a package wrapped in buckskin. He slipped an old Bible out of the buckskin sheath and laid it on the round-topped table.

"Clem Bartlett's Bible," said Steve Doyle. "It's the only thing I taken along when I rode away from the Steamboat Landin' Ranch."

Greely Mann took a bandana from his pocket and blew his red button of a nose like a bugle. He leaned across the back of the kitchen chair his short legs straddled.

"You spoke back there in the Honky-tonk, Steve, about recognizing the four leaders of that night rider mob. By the way one man stood hipshot. Another man's hands. A third man's run-over bootheels. A pair of silver-mounted spurs worn by a fourth. . . ."

Steve Doyle's hand dropped to the wood-en-handled six-shooter he packed and he grinned flatly an shook his wiry black head.

"I'll know 'em again," he said.

"And so shall I!" Greely Mann's eyes were blue sparks. "But we'll not be foolish enough to tip our hands by calling names. When the bets are all down, we'll print those names in bold ink."

Greely Mann got to his feet. The coffee had come to a boil and Steve set it on the back of the stove to simmer.

"There was a blacklist, Steve. On it were the names of the men who were hanged. Your name was on it until Clem Bartlett crossed it off with a splendid lie."

Steve Doyle nodded grimly. "Somebody gave 'em that list of names."

"Somebody who turned traitor," said Greely Mann. "Through fear or greed or some other reason—some man who knew the secret facts betrayed a trust. Otherwise Long Tex would still be ramroding some big cow outfit. And Monte would be dealing at the Honkytonk. And Clem Bartlett, cattleman, would be living in peace at his ranch. And young Steve Doyle would be working there learning the cattle business and living according to the honest lights of that Clem Bartlett.

"While the cow country mistrusted the Harbinsons for what they were—cattle rustlers and horse thieves—no shadow of suspicion was ever cast by Long Tex or by Monte. Whoever turned that blacklist over to the so-called Vigilantes had an intimate knowledge of the fact that they would all be gathered that night at the Steamboat Landing Ranch. Why they were gathered there, I have no way of knowing. But I could have made out that blacklist that hanged five men and gave you your orders to quit Montana Territory.

"Greely Mann knows many secrets. Nobody, especially when the whiskey in them is talking too loud and out of turn, pays attention to a shambling, down-and-out newspaperman sleeping off his booze at a table near the piano. I could have made out that blacklist and gotten it to those night raiders. Do I stand accused, young Stephen Doyle?"

"No, sir."

"The name," said the rotund little newspaperman, "is Greely."

"No, sir." Steve grinned as he quietly repeated his denial to Greely Mann's question.

"That leaves only one person—Attorney at Law Manton Shanley. That name was branded deep and black in the thirteenth step to a gallows that murdered five men without legal trial. By Judas, Steve, you have the soul of an artist. A grisly poetic touch. Manton Shanley, disbarred lawyer from nowhere and ex-convict."

Greely Mann went on through the bunk room into his office. He called out in his husky voice.

"Come here, Steve!"

Together they stood at the window. They saw the Professor walking down the street, a board under his arm. He came to a halt at his cabin, almost directly across the street from Greely Mann's ramshackle newspaper office.

His long lean back toward the street, the man placed the board above the closed door of his cabin. He had some spikes in his hand and he used a rock for a hammer to nail the board above his door. Then he stood back, his prematurely white head cocked to one side, a strange mirthless smile on his ravaged gray face.

Steve Doyle and Greely Mann stared—stared at that board that had been a gallows

step, and at the black branded lettering:
Manton Shanley—Attorney At Law

CHAPTER THREE

New Law for Trail City

NO MORE than twenty marked copies of the *Trail City Banner* went into the mail sack that was taken out by stagecoach to the nearest railroad point. And Greely Mann allowed enough time for the mail to reach its railway destination before he let Trail City have its first glimpse of the latest edition of his paper.

"We'll take no chances on the mail sack being rifled," he told Steve. And he pulled off his clothes and went to bed, ink-smeared, exhausted and drunker than he had been since he had come to Trail City five years ago.

Steve Doyle had watched the little newspaperman get out his latest edition of the *Trail City Banner*. Working like a galley slave, Greely Mann had lived on strong black coffee and a jug of forty-rod. When the job was done, Greely Mann had let go, and utter mental and physical exhaustion had claimed him. Steve had helped him into bed and had locked the doors and the heavy wooden shutters. During the twelve hours Greely Mann slept, Steve stood guard.

Across the street the passers-by stopped and stared at the sign of Manton Shanley, wondering who Manton Shanley was and where he had come from. Those who tried the door found it barred on the inside. The cabin was where the Professor slept at irregular intervals when he was missing from the Honkytonk. Trail City wondered what connection there could be between the Professor and Manton Shanley, Attorney at Law.

On the following day, Greely Mann, dressed in clean clothes, fed, and just an edge tipsy, carried a hefty bundle of his newly printed *Trail City Banner* down the street. He was his own newsboy and he distributed his papers in each of the ten or dozen saloons and left the rest on the long bar at the Honkytonk.

He had sent Steve Doyle across the street to Manton Shanley's with the first copy, as soon as the lowered window blinds had been raised over there.

The door opened in answer to Steve's knock. It opened slowly, with a deliberation that might have been caution or reluctance. Manton Shanley stood there, tall, gray-faced, as grimly as a man might stand on the gallows.

He opened the door wider. His thin lips never moved. His voice had a metallic sound.

"Come in."

When the door closed and they were alone, Steve handed him the folded copy of the *Trail City Banner,* its ink scarcely dry. And he studied the man's gray face as he stared at the bold black headlines.

"LAW OR OUTLAW?" The heavy black headlines topped the front page. And under the by-line of Greely Mann was written, as only that master of his craft could put it into printed words, the graphic story of what he scathingly denounced as the gallows murder of five men, hanged without trial by an organized murder mob.

The *Trail City Banner* held no brief for outlaws. If those five men had been guilty, they had deserved punishment. But legal punishment can be meted out only after a man has been tried by a court of law and found guilty of crime. This wholesale lynching was murder. Murder without benefit of trial. Now the question of their guilt or innocence would forever remain a black blot on the name of the Territory of Montana. And until those white hooded murderers were brought to justice, Trail City must bear the burden of their guilt.

Those night riders banded together under the misnomer of Vigilantes had made a grave mistake. They had let live a young cowboy named Steve Doyle. They had forced this young cowboy to stand there, his hands tied, and watch the murder hanging of five men who had been lynched without fair trial by a hoodlum mob. They had ordered young Steve Doyle to let those hanged men swing from the limb of a cottonwood tree. They told him to quit Montana Territory or he would be hanged, as he had watched them hang those five men. But Steve Doyle had a man's forthright courage. There was no craven, no coyote, in his make-up. He had ridden to Trail City alone. He had given his eye-witness story of night-rider murder to Greely Mann and the *Trail City Banner.*

"Steve Doyle had the courage to defy

their murderers' commands. The *Trail City Banner* has the courage to print the story Steve Doyle gave to the Banner's editor, Greely Mann. In the name of Law and Order, has Trail City, Montana Territory, the courage to stand behind this beardless youth and the *Trail City Banner?*

"If this be a challenge, then meet it! Or join the craven mob that hides its ugly murdering identity beneath the pillow cases and sheets that now are forever soiled by the murder of five men!"

There was an entire column under the black heading: THE THIRTEENTH GALLOWS STEP.

"Steve Doyle brought that thirteenth gallows step to Trail City. The citizens of this town may view it. It is nailed above the cabin door of a citizen of Trail City who, like Steve Doyle and Greely Mann of the *Banner,* has the courage of his convictions. On that thirteenth step, burned deep with a branding iron, you will read: MANTON SHANLEY—ATTORNEY AT LAW. Mark that name well, you citizens of Trail City. Unless you are sadly

Never mind his yacht... how's his
'6NX APPEAL'
"6NX-appeal" is cheek-appeal. It's yours with Star Double Edge Blades—made by the exclusive 6NX Process! Star positively makes your double edge razor perform miracles! Single edge razors call for Star Single Edge Blades! Millions of men use Star daily!
Star Division, American Safety Razor Corp., Brooklyn 1, N. Y.
DOUBLE EDGE
4 for 10¢
MADE BY 6NX PROCESS
STAR
DOUBLE EDGE
BLADES
STAR
SINGLE EDGE
4 for 10¢
Single Edge
STAR
BLADES
STAR
STAR BLADES

lacking in foresight and courage, you will hold a meeting of your solid, law-abiding citizenry. And you will elect this man, Manton Shanley, for your Justice of the Peace."

STEVE DOYLE stood there. He saw a room that had been converted into some semblance of a law office. A full set of law books bound in leather lined the shelves along the log walls. There was a desk and a few barroom chairs. There was a framed document of parchment to prove that Manton Shanley was a graduate of law school. The place was clean and, save for these furnishings, bare.

Manton Shanley scanned the *Banner* quickly. Even to the last item at the foot of the page where it was blocked in by a black border. This item said that Stephen Doyle was filing legal claim to the Steamboat Landing Ranch on the Missouri River.

Manton Shanley stood there on his long legs. His pale bleak eyes looked straight into the eyes of young Steve Doyle. His long-fingered hands gripped the copy of the *Trail City Banner*.

"This," Manton Shanley's voice sounded toneless, "is a weapon of destruction." He folded the freshly printed copy of the newspaper.

His thin lips twisted. "You have returned to a man, Steve, something he had discarded, something belonging to his birthright. To Manton Shanley it was the most precious thing he owned—the title of attorney. You branded it deep on a gallows step. You see it framed there on my wall, as it came to a young man who had your youth, your ideals, your young dreams. And when it was handed him, that was the proudest day of his life. Young Manton Shanley held his destiny then in his hands. A parchment scroll.

"Young Manton Shanley had a talent. Music. It was in his soul. He could have used that God-given talent to better himself. But he had paid his way through law school by playing the piano in a honkytonk. And while he studied law, young Manton Shanley was acquiring a liberal education in the honkytonks where he earned a living. Women of the wrong sort, men of shady reputation. . . . And he had a false loyalty to that underworld."

Manton Shanley's thin-lipped smile twisted. "The Professor and Manton Shanley, lawyer, became strangely woven together with a silken rope that snared Manton Shanley and tied his hands and in the end dragged him into prison. Disgraced, disbarred from the practice of law back in the state where he was born and reared. When he was released from prison by the same underworld connections that had sent him there, Manton Shanley ran away in the night with his law library and his framed diploma. Manton Shanley was dead. The Professor lived on, here in Trail City.

"The Professor was content to live in his own hell. But it wasn't in the cards. Not as they were dealt him by a gambler called Monte. Monte found out that the Professor was an ex-convict named Manton Shanley. Monte was known as a square gambler. But all expert gamblers know how to deal from a cold deck. And he cold decked Manton Shanley out of what he wanted and badly needed in the way of expert advice and information. Dead Manton Shanley was resurrected to suffer the damned torments of hell on earth!"

Manton Shanley wiped beads of cold sweat from his face.

"If I'd had the guts," he said bitterly, "I'd have killed Monte. But my guts were gone. Do you want me to go on, finish the rest of it?"

Steve Doyle shook his head. "No. Drop it. When the time comes, when the sign is right, I'll have you tell me what there is to tell. Right now I need you. But not the way Monte needed your legal help. I was goin' to play it lone-handed—with a gun—and make you give me legal protection when I did my killin'. Then Greely Mann took the deal away from me. It's there in his *Trail City Banner*. He didn't print it till we saw you hang up your shingle yesterday mornin'. He's playin' for keeps. So am I. And so, I reckon, are you."

"It's for keeps," said Manton Shanley.

Steve Doyle kept staring at the man. It was like watching something not unlike a miracle taking place. Little of the Professor now remained. Manton Shanley stood tall and straight, distinguished looking, with his white hair clean and brushed, his head held proudly, and his clean-cut, flat-planed face no longer looking ravaged by some inner torture. His lips moved when he talked. There was nothing there

now to show he had served time in prison.

Manton Shanley was watching Steve. He smiled. His lips lost their bitter, sardonic twist.

"Even if this is no more than a brief reprieve from the ultimate sentence of death at your hands," smiled Manton Shanley, Attorney at Law, "I thank you for it. This is the first time I have ever been so deeply in debt to any man. It is a debt I shall do my utmost to repay."

Neither Steve Doyle nor Manton Shanley had paid any attention to the sound of hoofs outside on the street. Men on horseback had been riding into and out of town since Trail City had come into existence.

The door was shoved open and a man stood there in the doorway. Then men behind him shoved and he was pushed inside as others crowded in until the log cabin was crowded with men who wore cartridge belts and holstered guns. Their hands were on their six-shooters.

Foremost among them was a big rawboned grizzled cowman with a long under jaw and a jutting hawk nose. His eyes were blood-shot slits. He spat a stream of tobacco juice on the freshly scrubbed pine floor, as he stood there, thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt. His name was Tate Purcell, owner of the big Boxed P outfit that straddled both sides of the Missouri River below the Steamboat Landing Ranch.

Behind Purcell and flanking him on either side were his three big rawboned sons. They had been born triplets, but there were few resemblances among them.

Rafe was slovenly from the crown of his shapeless sweat-stained black hat to the heels of his rusty, run-over boots. Rafe Purcell was the best all around cowhand of them all—but he was a horse killer. His right eye was as green as bottle glass. His left eye was milky white, blind. He had been born with that milk-eye.

Dude Purcell was what his nickname implied. A range dude, his taste ran to loud colored shirts and buckskin-foxed pants with the legs shoved Texas style into fancy boots. His silver mounted spurs had Dude engraved on them. Dude had reddish sandy hair and mustache and his eyes were as yellow as the rind of a lemon.

Tolliver Purcell, called Tol, was towheaded and lantern-jawed. His pale gray eyes were bloodshot and in the sunlight they were so colorless that only the red veins showed where the whites met the pale gray iris. Tol Purcell bragged he could shoot equally well with either hand. He was a dead shot and quick triggered and ugly tempered.

STEVE DOYLE stood with his back against the far wall, his hand on his gun. There was a faint grin on his face. He tilted his hat back with his left thumb. His gray-blue eyes took in the Purcells and the tough Boxed P cowhands they had fetched to town. Steve's voice broke across the ugly silence.

"Before you Boxed P Purcells go any fu'ther," said Steve quietly, "you better git yourselves a copy of the *Trail City Banner* and ketch up on the latest news."

Manton Shanley unfolded the newspaper he held in his hand. They were staring at him, staring harder as slow recognition of the man came to them.

"It's that damned honkytonk Professor," Dude Purcell said.

Old Man Tate Purcell's green eyes were staring at the newspaper. They read the headlines and enough of what was printed on the front page to get the gist of Greely Mann's scathing denunciation of the night riders.

Grizzled Tate Purcell spat out a curse with his tobacco juice, and waved them all back out the open doorway with a sweeping long-armed gesture.

"By the eternal hell," Old Tate's voice was a snarl, "somebody's goin' to hang fer this!"

"You seem to grasp the general idea," said Manton Shanley, his voice hard and metallic. "Legally hanged. Take the *Banner* along. I've read it."

"You damned two-bit piano thumper," Tol's hands dropped to the two guns he carried in holsters tied low on each thigh, "Who sold you chips in the game?" But his father shoved him back with an ugly scowl.

"Where's this Manton Shanley?" snarled old man Tate Purcell, "The attorney at law? We seen his sign. And what we find inside is this young coyote Steve Doyle and a duded up honkytonk piano player. We want a talk with this lawyer, Manton Shanley."

"I'm Manton Shanley. But you got here

too late. I'm representing Stephen Doyle."

"Somethin' stinks," said the slovenly Rafe. "Stinks bad."

"Could be," grinned Steve Doyle, "your own Purcell stink you smell. That odor was shore strong the last time I got a sniff of it from under them white sheets and pillow cases. Why don't you take your Purcell stench back to the Boxed P?

"I'm goin' back to the Steamboat Landin' Ranch. I'm claimin' it now, like Clem Bartlett had me promise him. It won't be much of a night rider chore to hang me. The gallows still stands. But if you hang me, Lawyer Manton Shanley will put that real law rope around your Purcell necks and you'll hang. Like I said, you Purcells better read it there in the *Trail City Banner*. Ketch yourselves up with the latest news. I'm goin' back to the Steamboat Landin' Ranch. I'm servin' notice on your Purcell Boxed P outfit to stay off my land. Now quit stinkin' up this place and get out!"

"Gimme the say-so, Paw," said Tol Purcell, his hands gripping his guns till the knuckles showed bone white through the unwashed skin, "and I'll drop these two in their tracks."

Old Tate Purcell shook his grizzled head. There was fear showing in his blood-shot green eyes. He herded them out and backed out the door. They got on their Boxed P horses and rode down the wide dusty street of Trail City, old Tate Purcell in the lead, Rafe and Tol on either side, and Dude sashaying along on his horse, swaggering for the benefit of any women who might be watching from the windows.

Manton Shanley took out his white pocket handkerchief and wiped away the cold sweat.

"Courage," he said, "is a thing I sorely lack. I've got no guts, Steve, for that sort of a showdown."

"You handled yourself all right," said Steve. He was worried about what the Purcells might do to Greely Mann.

Then the rotund little newspaperman came out of the *Banner* office and across the street.

"Even without the hocus-pocus of white sheets and pillow case hoods," he said, swinging his jug by its handle, "the Purcell clan have an evil and sinister look."

Greely Mann set the jug down carefully on the desk. In his other hand he carried the old Bible that had belonged to Clem Bartlett. He placed it on the table beside the jug, thumbed back the cover and pointed to some handwritting on the fly-leaf. His eyes were studying Steve Doyle.

"This was Clem Bartlett's family Bible," Greely Mann said in his whiskey voice. "Listed here are the names of his wife and children with their birth dates and the dates of their death. His wife Mary gave birth to two children. One son died in infancy. According to the dates, their son Clem died when he was no more than a few months old. Greely Mann shook his bushy white head. "A sad blow to a man, losing the son named after him." He paused.

"Then," he pointed to the name written in ink that was now faded, "a second child was born, a girl child. And we find Clem Bartlett still carrying the burden of disappointment that he had no son to bear his name. But he did the next best thing. He named his new-born daughter Clementine."

The little newspaperman had a story here in those names written in the old family Bible. His bright blue eyes misted.

"Stark tragedy struck. Note these dates Mary Higgins Bartlett, wife of Clem Bartlett, died just seven days after the date of birth of Clementine."

Greely Mann looked across the desk and into the gray blue eyes of young Steve Doyle.

"Clementine Bartlett's birth date is written here. But there is no date that records the death of that daughter born to Clem and Mary Bartlett. Therefore we must presume that Clementine Bartlett lived. That she is still living. And reckoning from the date of her birth, Clementine Bartlett must now be sixteen years old. And therefore, Clementine Bartlett, daughter of Clem Bartlett, deceased, is sole heir to the Steamboat Landing Ranch." Greely Mann turned his eyes on Manton Shanley.

"You know your law as it's written in those books. Have I interpreted the law of inheritance correctly?"

Manton Shanley nodded. "Clementine Bartlett is sole heir to the Steamboat Ranch."

Steve looked at the two men. His eyes never flinched under their cold scrutiny. But the healthy color drained slowly from his tanned skin and his fists clenched. Then he spoke, his voice choked with anger.

"As long as I'm robbin' Clem Bartlett's daughter out of the Steamboat Ranch," he said, "I might as well go whole hog. I'm puttin' in a legal claim right now for the Harbinson ranch acrost the river. You're my lawyer, mister. Make that out in black and white."

Steve Doyle eyed the attorney coldly. Manton Shanley reached for pen and ink. Steve faced the rotund Greely Mann across the desk.

"You kin get out an extra edition to your *Trail City Banner.*" Steve Doyle bit off each word. "Tell how Steve Doyle and Manton Shanley are in cahoots like a pair of buzzards pickin' at dead men's bones. My name was on the Vigilante blacklist. The name of Manton Shanley should have been on that list. This proves it. Them Purcell Ku Kluxers will enjoy readin' it. They'll ride back down the street and mob Steve Doyle and his shyster lawyer and take us down yonder to the gallows at Steamboat Landin' Ranch to finish their hangin' chores."

Steve's voice cracked like a whip. "To hell with you both!" Then he went out the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sixguns Blaze a Showdown

MANTON SHANLEY and Greely Mann had been too taken aback by young Steve's sudden outburst of hot temper to voice an argument. And if either man had gotten in the way right then it might have been disastrous. That hot-headed young cowpuncher was on the prod.

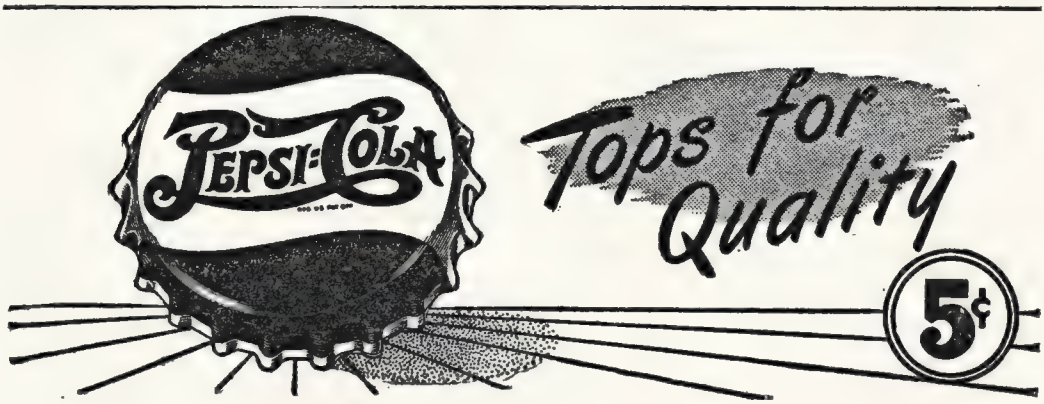
Steve had turned his back on them. The anger that burned inside him sent him headlong out through the doorway and onto the wide plank sidewalk. And he walked straight into a sudden hail of bullets. Hell busted loose. Hell on horseback. And it caught Steve Doyle empty handed and flat-footed out in the broad middle.

The Boxed P Purcells were taking the town. They were painting Trail City a gory red—shooting up the little cow town as they had shot it up before. Churning, pounding hoofs hid them in their own dust. Only the four riders in the lead could get anything like a clear vision as the dust blinded the tough cowhands behind. And it was tough old Tate Purcell and his three stalwart triplet sons who rode four abreast in the lead of their cowhands.

Only his unexpected and abrupt appearance out on the street saved Steve from swift death. The hard riding Purcells were not expecting such an easy target. Their horses were spurred to a run. Dude had hung both spurs high in his horse's shoulders and the big black gelding with white spotted rump bawled and squealed and pitched, careening into Tol's horse, and spoiling the deadly aim of Tol Purcell's two six-shooters.

Steve Doyle stumbled and went down, clawing at his gun. And in those few split seconds he could almost smell and taste death. Bullets kicked up jets of yellow dust before him and more bullets splintered the wide plank walk. The leaden hail smashed out the windowpanes of the *Banner* office and shattered the windows of Manton Shanley's new law office.

Manton Shanley grabbed Greely Mann and threw the rotund little newspaperman into a corner out of line of the deadly hot



lead that came through the front windows. The door was open and Manton Shanley went out through it at a crouching run. He grabbed Steve Doyle up from the dusty street and carried him and flung him inside. Then he stumbled in after him, doing it so swiftly that it was over and done with and the door slammed shut before the Purcells realized that it had happened.

They charged past, horses spurred to a run, Dude's horse pitching and weaving so that he snarled up the riders behind and they piled up in their own dust. Bullets whined like hornets, spatting into the log walls and thudding into the handsome leather-bound law books on the shelves.

Greeley Mann crouched there in a far corner, his eyes hard and bright, cussing in his whiskey voice.

"By Judas, if they've murdered that lad. . . ."

"Flatten out, Steve," Manton Shanley held him down. "Low bridge." The bullets whined over them. "Where you hit?"

Steve rolled over, a grin on his face. "You paid your debt, now. All I got hurt was my pride. But you're bleedin' like stuck beef."

There was a real grin on Manton Shanley's lean face. It was a painful grin, but it was genuine.

"You left your saddle carbine when you departed in anger, Steve. Mind if I borrow it? I'll need cartridges." He grinned. "I'll manage to pull the trigger myself."

Manton Shanley crawled low along the wall to where Steve's carbine leaned. Steve pulled loose cartridges from his pocket, put them in his hat and shoved it along the floor.

There was a rifle of the same caliber on a pair of deer antlers above the door. When the wild shooting outside went on down the street, the tall lawyer reached up and got the weapon. Greeley Mann came over and got it and loaded it from the cartridges in Steve's hat. He'd shot squirrels as a boy, he said, and with luck, he might hit a big Purcell at close range.

From the far end of the street sounded a fresh outburst of gunfire. Howls and yelps of pain and the cursing of the Purcells knifed through the echoing explosion of guns. Greely Mann's eyes glittered.

"The citizens of Trail City," he said, "seem to have organized at long last against the lawless painting of their town. Their response to my summons to arms in the final edition of *The Trail City Banner* is most gratifying. Even without their sheets and pillow cases the Purcells are now revealed as the night riding murderers. This marks finis to the lynch law of the so-called Vigilantes. Law and order will rise from the shambles of this day's bloodshed."

Greely Mann had distributed the ink-damp copies of his *Trail City Banner* up and down the only street of the little cow-town. While he held no brief for the past sins of the hanged men, he had hinted so broadly at the descriptions of the four leaders of the self-styled Vigilantes that anyone reading it and having acquaintance by sight with the Purcells could not help but identify them. Hipshot old Tate Purcell. Deadshot Tol. The slovenly Rafe in his run-over boots. Dude and his silver mounted spurs.

Now the Purcells and their Boxed P hardcases had ridden to town to celebrate their wholesale lynching and to cow the citizens of Trail City into submission. And the gauntlet Greely Mann had flung down to the law abiding citizens of Trail City had been picked up. The Purcells were getting a rough reception.

Steve Doyle's hot anger had cooled as quickly as it had flared. Manton Shanley had saved his life. Greely Mann had championed his lone cause. Now the three of them were fighting side by side with a good chance they might all be killed. He had to clear up something he had been too proud and hurt to explain before.

"I got some things I want to tell you," Steve said. "Clem Bartlett lost all track of his daughter Clementine. When his wife died from the effects of childbirth, Clem killed the drunken doctor that had been too careless. Killed him with his two hands. The woman who was nursin' the baby girl taken the child away. Clem had to quit the country. He gave the nurse all the money he had and a bill of sale to his Texas outfit. He told her to sell and keep the money in trust for the baby Clementine. He'd write her when he got beyond reach of the law. It was a year or more before he felt he'd got far enough away. He'd kept his name. Too prideful to ever change it. He told the woman to write him. . . .

"Clem Bartlett never got an answer. The

woman had sold his outfit and taken the baby Clementine away. Disappeared. He never could locate the woman or the baby. Then he found out the woman was dead. She'd died durin' a smallpox epidemic at Dodge City. She had enough money to pay for a coffin. She'd blowed in the rest. She'd bin workin' in a honkytonk. Nobody had ever seen a child with her. She'd put the baby in some orphan school somewheres.

"I told Clem Bartlett before they hung him that if I wasn't hung I'd pick it up where he left off and try to locate Clementine Bartlett and if ever I found her, I'd hand her over the Steamboat Landin' Ranch. He asked me if I'd look after her if ever I found her and I said I would. And that's what I aim to do if I don't stop a Boxed P bullet."

"KNIGHTHOOD," Greely Mann's whiskey voice had a husky sound, "is still in flower. It is a quest that well befits young Stephen, eh, Shanley? Let me live and I'll pledge allegiance to it. It shall be printed in the *Trail City Banner* and scattered far and wide to be reprinted in every newspaper throughout the land. We'll tilt the crock of romance." Greely Mann was reaching for his jug when a hail of bullets spattered and he went down.

Purcell and his bunch came with a wild rush, yelling and shooting as they went past on down the street and back again.

Steve Doyle crouched near one shattered window with his six-shooter. Manton Shanley stood against the wall beside the other window. Their guns spat fire and they did not shoot to miss. But the dust cloud screened the Purcells as they spurred their horses past. It was guesswork and they couldn't tell a Purcell from a hired hand in the dust.

Some of the gun-slicks had been set afoot and had holed up in the *Banner* office across the street, while the others scattered and circled and gathered again to storm the feed and livery barn where most of the fighting citizens of Trail City had taken their stand.

The loud raucous voice of old Tate Purcell sounded through the gunfire as he bellowed his fighting orders. Rafe's wolf howl and the high-pitched cowboy yelps of Dude and the snarling cursing of Two-Gun Tol added to the din of the battle. And the fighting was going to the Boxed P outfit.

The citizens of Trail City were not gun slingers. They were merchants and saloon keepers and clerks and bartenders; gun fighting was not a part of their day's work. Their shots went wild, for the most part, after the first surprise volley they had fired point bank at the Boxed P men. And they had no knack for fighting nor any taste for bloodshed.

The Purcells and their tough cowhands, however, were trained for it. They knew how it felt to be shot at. They had a zest for gun fighting and a thirst for killing. To have these citizens of the town shooting at them added spice to the sport of shooting up Trail City. They had made the residents of the little cowtown hunt their holes like so many prairie dogs. Now this armed protest only made it more exciting. And it gave them an excuse for wholesale looting. They rode in through the swinging doors of the saloons and out again, waving uncorked bottles. The Purcell Boxed P outfit was taking the cowtown of Trail City. Once they got a claim on it, they'd hold it.

"It's all ourn!" bellowed old Tate Purcell, "fer the takin'. Go to it, boys!"

Drunk on forty-rod booze and victory now, Old Tate Purcell and his three tough triplet sons were staking six-shooter claim to Trail City.

Steve Doyle reloaded his smoking empty six-shooter and shoved it into its holster. He crawled over to where Greely Mann lay in a widening pool of blood. Pain seared the little fat newspaperman's bright blue eyes. His voice had a sob in it.

"They're wrecking my paper, Steve. By Judas, they're tearing the *Banner* apart!"

"Take it easy, sir." Steve found the wound in Greely Mann's thigh. He ripped his black silk neck cloth into strips, fashioned a crude tourniquet above the tear in the flesh and twisted it tight.

"The name's Greely."

"Hang onto it, Greely. I come for this." He picked up the rifle and crawled back. He took some .30-30 cartridges from the hat.

"Better let me do the shootin'," said Steve. "We can't waste a bullet from now on."

Steve Doyle had never killed a man until now. But he went to work at it with a cold

skill that sent a shiver along Manton Shanley's long spine. Steve's eyes were slivers of polished steel as he crouched there and lined his sights.

He got a man on horseback in the line of the rifle sights and pulled the trigger. The rider jerked in his saddle and toppled off sideways when his horse swerved, landing on his head and shoulders in the heavy dust of the street.

"That," said Steve, levering the smoking shell out, "was Rafe Purcell."

It was a good rifle. It had a polished walnut stock with a pistol grip checkered on it. It was beautifully balanced and you raised the rear sight to the right notch and it put a bullet where you held your bead.

Steve patted the stock and grinned.

"It belonged to Monte," said Manton Shanley. "He kept it in my cabin."

Dude Purcell rode out of a saloon down the street, his silver-mounted spurs glinting in the sunlight. It was two hundred yards and Steve thumbed the rear sight up a notch and squinted along the lined sights. He squeezed the trigger. Dude Purcell threw up both hands and his silver mounted sixgun flipped out of his gun hand. The big horse jumped as a spur rowel raked his flank, and Dude went over backwards, his legs flopping in the air and the silver spurs glittering in the dust.

The big gelding stampeded on down the street past the *Banner* office and Manton Shanley's cabin, stirrups flopping.

"Tally two Purcells," said Steve Doyle quietly.

There was a lull in the shooting at the far end of the street. The men who had ridden into the saloons on either side of the wide dusty street stayed inside. Over at the *Banner* office the firing died out. The Boxed P cowhands across the street had seen Dude's big horse go past, saddle empty, and it took the fight out of them.

For five or ten minutes nothing happened. And then men on horseback spurred out of the saloons on either side of the street at a wild run, holding their fire. And they held it until they were close to the log cabin, where over the door was a gallows step branded MANTON SHANLEY—ATTORNEY AT LAW. Then they slid their horses to a halt in a cloud of swirling yellow dust and their guns spat flame through the dust cloud.

STEVE DOYLE and Manton Shanley no longer stood near the two front windows. At Steve's suggestion they had gouged out strips of chinking from between the logs and they crouched by these gun slits.

"Give Tol Purcell to me, Steve." Manton Shanley's voice was metallic.

Then he poked the barrel of the carbine through the open slit between the logs and his pale eyes were bleak as he took aim and pulled the trigger.

Steve saw Tol weaving in his saddle. Then he kicked both feet from the stirrups and swung a leg up across his saddle horn, landing on wide-spread legs. He had a six-shooter in each hand and there was blood on the belly of his dirty shirt. Then both his guns were spewing fire and the .45 slugs were coming in through the gun slit. Steve heard Manton Shanley grunt as though he'd been kicked in the belly. Then he fired and the bullet struck Tol Purcell in the jaw and it came out the back of Tol's neck. Blood gushed from the slack-jawed mouth and Tol went down on his spread legs and lay face down in the heavy dirt.

Steve Doyle didn't dare take a look at Manton Shanley. He was crouched there with the gun hammer back and his finger on the trigger. He tried to catch a glimpse of old Tate Purcell but a half-dozen Boxed P hardcases were milling their horses around in a close bunch and the dust boiled up until he couldn't make out one man from another. Steve had no more than two or three cartridges left and he figured Manton Shanley had fired his last cartridge.

"You alive, Manton?" called Steve.

"Yes."

"Take my six-shooter. Shoot into 'em 'till they scatter."

He felt the gun being pulled from its holster. Then Manton Shanley shoved the barrel of Steve's six-shooter into the slit until it wedged there and he began shooting into the men who milled their horses around old Tate. He must have hit a couple of them before they got spooked and they yelled something at old Tate Purcell as they broke away and scattered. There were only two who rode as though they were unhit, and those two spurred off as though they were actually quitting the country for keeps.

Old man Tate Purcell was left alone out

there in the broad middle of the wide dusty main street of Trail City. He had a six-shooter gripped in his gnarled hand. His face was a mask of hate and his eyes were bloodshot and slitted and as green as slivers of splintered bottle glass. His tobacco stained teeth bared in a snarl as he spat in the dust.

Steve Doyle shoved the rifle at Manton Shanley and jerked his six-shooter from where it was jammed between the logs. He ejected the six empty shells and shoved fresh cartridges into the chambers. Then he stepped to the door, yanked it open and stepped out, the gun in his hand spitting flame.

Old Tate Purcell was shooting at him, but the tough old cowman's bullets were missing. Steve had beaten him to the first shot by the fraction of a second and that split second told the tale because old Tate was gut-shot and he couldn't shoot straight. He was dying in his saddle with three of Steve's .45 slugs in his belly. He gripped his six-shooter with both hands and pointed it in Steve Doyle's direction and pulled the trigger. The recoil kicked the gun out of his hands and he slumped over across his saddle horn, landing with a heavy thud in the dust. But in the brief second before death glazed his slitted eyes they glittered with a killer's triumph. He had seen his heavy .45 slug hit Steve.

Steve felt the smashing impact of the .45 slug that seemed to tear his shoulder off. He went down and his head thudded against the floor.

SOMEBODY kept calling his name but the sound came from a long, long way off. It was a girl's voice, and that was strange because Steve didn't know any girls. He wondered if he was dead and that some angel was calling to him.

"Steve. . . . Steve!"

Somebody with cool hands was pushing the hair gently back from his forehead. The hands belonged to the voice and they were gentle sort of hands that were trying to smooth away the pain that knotted inside his head and pounded against the inside of his skull like hot hammers.

"I'm here, Steve. You've been calling me and I'm here. I just got here. On the

stagecoach part way and then horseback because it was faster. They told me I had to get here fast. I got here, Steve."

"Clem. . . ." Steve couldn't get his eyes open against the black weight of pain. "Clem . . . Clementine. . . . Like the son. . . . Miner. . . . Forty-niner. . . . And his daughter. . . . Clementine. . . ."

"I'm Clementine. Don't go away from me, Steve. You promised my father Clem Bartlett that you'd take care of me. You can't go back on the promise you made Clem Bartlett."

Steve got his eyes open. At first it was a blinding red glare and then like a gun flash. Then it cleared and the pain wasn't so bad. He could see a girl's face and head. She had reddish brown hair and her eyes were the same color. There were tears in her eyes and he wanted to reach up and wipe 'em away but he couldn't move. He said she'd have to wipe 'em away herself, only his voice didn't make any sound. She must have heard him anyhow because she let out a choked little sound that wasn't either a sob or a laugh, but kind of in between.

She leaned down close and the tears that hung there splashed down on Steve's face as she kissed him right on the mouth. It was the first time a girl had ever kissed him like that and it made him feel almighty proud.

"I believe," said a man's voice, "that did it. You can go now, young lady. You must be all in. It's a long trip for a girl. That last twenty miles horseback and you'd never ridden a horse. A warm bath and some sleep. If you're needed I'll have you called."

"I'm needed right now, Doctor. It's the first time in my whole life anybody ever needed me and here I stay till . . . till . . ."

"Till hell freezes over," sounded a whiskey voice. That was Greely Mann's voice and it made Steve feel good to hear it. He must have managed a grin because he heard the little round-bellied newspaperman chuckle.

"You might try that again, Clementine," chuckled Greely Mann.

Steve got his eyes pried open then. But it was Manton Shanley he saw. The last time he'd seen the attorney's face it was gray and blood-smeared. There was a bandage around Manton Shanley's head. It had a slightly soiled look as if he'd worn it a while and it needed changing.

Manton Shanley answered the question in Steve's eyes.

"It was Greely's *Trail City Banner*, Steve, that turned the trick. "Clementine Bartlett read it reprinted in the *Kansas City Star*. She's been in the convent school there since she can remember. She'd found out her father's name was Clem Bartlett. She made the Mother Superior let her come. The editor of the *Kansas City Star* is an old friend of Greely Mann's. He got the story from the Mother Superior at the convent and wired Greely. A man met the stagecoach with a fast saddle horse for her.

"You've been battling for your life for ten days and nights, Steve. That bullet almost had your name on it. You kept calling for Clementine, saying you'd promised Clem Bartlett you'd locate her and look after her. But she's looking after you till you get in shape to take her to the Steamboat Landing Ranch. Take it easy while you can, Steve. You got a job ahead of you. I've got you clear deed to the Harbinson ranch. And the town of Trail City with Greely Mann, the new mayor, is handing you the Boxed P outfit."

"For a wedding present," chuckled the whiskey voice of Greely Mann.

Steve found he had one hand he could move. He reached out and groped and Clementine Bartlett blushed like the schoolgirl she had been until an hour ago, and took Steve's hand and held onto it.

"One thing for the record, Steve," said Manton Shanley, "before Greely and I go down to the Honkytonk where he made me promise I'd play the piano for him while he got a little drunk.

"It's about the blacklist handed to the Purcell Vigilantes. Dude Purcell proved to be the toughest of their clan. He lived a while. Before he died he cleaned the slate. Joe and Sam Harbinson made a deal with the Purcell outfit. They wanted the Steamboat Landing Ranch. Clem Bartlett was making a deal with Long Tex and Monte. If they'd quit their road agent war against the Wells Fargo Company, Clem would help them get the Boxed P outfit. Clem Bartlett had caught the Purcells rustling cattle. He'd told old Tate Purcell he'd have to sell out or get run out of Montana Territory. And Clem had sent word to Long

Tex and Monte to come to Steamboat Landing Ranch. Clem would get the Purcells there. Together they would pool enough money to pay Old Tate Purcell a fair price for his Boxed P outfit. Long Tex had some real or fancied grudge against the Wells Fargo Company. He'd talked Monte into helping him. And Monte had blackmailed me into tipping him off to when shipments of money were going out or coming in by Wells Fargo Express.

"So they were there at the Steamboat Landing Ranch. The Harbinsons were in cahoots with the Purcells on the cattle rustling. They shoved some stolen cattle across the river and onto Clem Bartlett's range to give the thing some excuse for what happened later. And the Purcells rode up in their Ku Klux sheets and you got caught with the others. The Purcells double-crossed the two Harbinson brothers. That's why Joe and Sam Harbinson begged and slobbered at the end and the Purcells shoved them off the gallows before they could yell too loud. Some of those Boxed P cowhands had been hoaxed into joining that so-called Vigilante outfit and they had to be kept hoodwinked or they'd stampede.

"If there was a blacklist, Joe and Sam Harbinson made it out. They never knew that Monte had me blackmailed into tipping him off and so if they had a list, I wasn't on it. I'd told Monte I was through. He knew I meant it. He said he and Long Tex had held up their last stagecoach, so I could go back to my piano playing. I'm sorry Clem Bartlett had to die thinking I'd turned traitor. . . ."

"Clem never thought it." Steve's voice sounded weak. "It was something Monte said once that made me sure you was in on the road agent jobs, but I never told Clem. I'm sorry I had to think what I did. I'd begun to take it all back there in the cabin. You risked your life to save mine."

THEN they were all gone. The doctor took his pulse and temperature and went out. And there was only Clementine left. She stayed there until Steve dropped off to sleep, and she too was asleep in her chair when Greely Mann and Manton Shanley tip-toed in and led her, sleepy eyed, to her hotel room. But she was back when Steve Doyle woke up in the night.

"Clementine!" Steve woke from a dream.

"I'm here, Steve."

"Then it's not a dream."

"No, Steve, it's not a dream."

"In the dream, you kissed me."

"But this isn't a dream." Her head bent low and she kissed Steve and he held onto her hand and went back to sleep.

Over at the Honkytonk, in the still hour before dawn, the Professor played softly for Greely Mann.

Greely Mann slumped in his chair and lifted his glass in sort of a salute.

"You've lost something." His eyes were bright sparks. "Lost it for ever—bitterness . . . hatred . . . despair . . . whatever it was warped your soul. It's gone. A man can't weep in his booze over that kind of music. It's lost its black magic. The Professor is dead." Greely Mann downed his drink and smashed his empty glass against the battered piano.

The piano stool creaked as Manton Shanley turned. And he smiled.

"I left a girl behind me, Greely. She hung onto what I threw away. Faith in myself. In God. She made me promise I'd send for her when I found myself again. I've written her. She'll he here soon."

"Judge Manton Shanley." Greely Mann nodded. "She'll be proud of you."

"And you, Greely? I saw the telegram from the editor of the *Kansas City Star*. You'll go back to the big city? Take back your paper? He said it was waiting for you."

Greely Mann shook his head. "Trail City thinks I'm one hell of a big man, Manton. I'm owner, publisher, the whole works when I get out my *Trail City Banner*. There's peace here, Manton. Trail City doesn't give a damn if Greely Mann did time in prison. But the big city would never let Greely Mann forget he's an ex-convict. I'm content to stay here till I die."

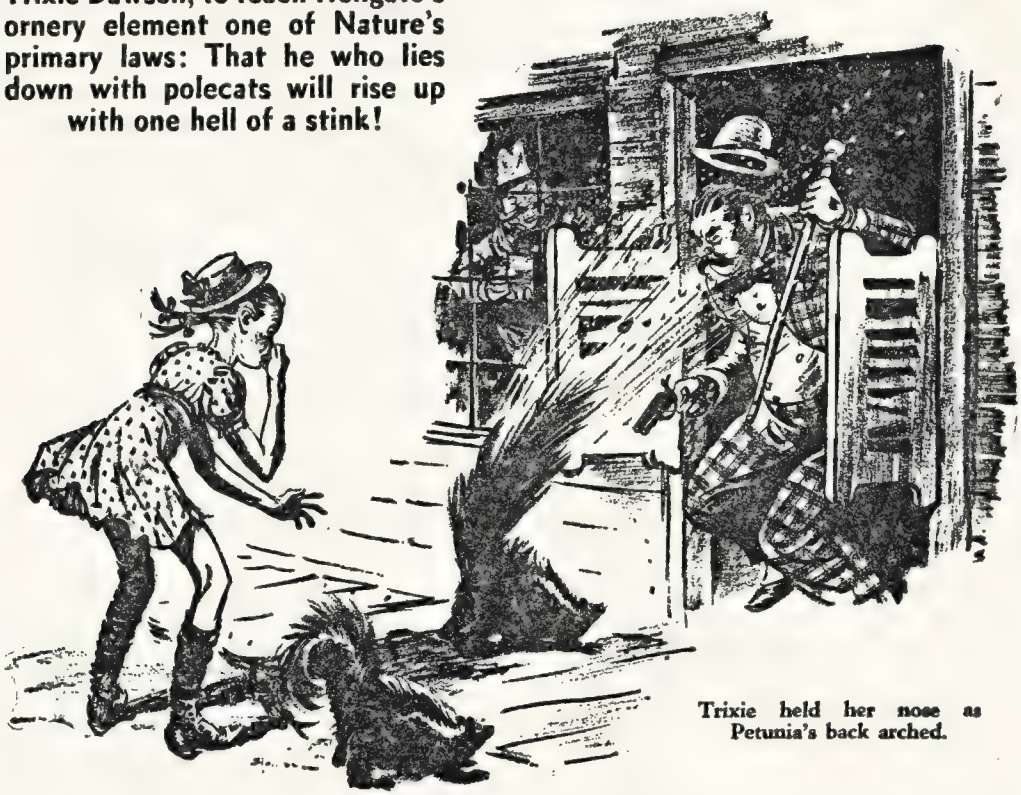
"Steve Doyle," said Manton Shanley, "is young. He'll need us both. Greely Mann and his *Trail City Banner*. . . . Judge Manton Shanley. . . ." He pulled the lid down over the piano keys and quit his creaky stool.

Together the two men walked out of the Honkytonk and into the dawn.

THE END

It took that half-pint of dynamite, Trixie Dawson, to teach Hellgate's ornery element one of Nature's primary laws: That he who lies down with polecats will rise up with one hell of a stink!

By
BARNIE STACY



Trixie held her nose as Petunia's back arched.

THE woolly denizens of sin-packed Hellgate, borderland county seat, reared back on hairy haunches, rubbed bleary eyes, and gasped.

They were used to the sight of two-legged polecats prowling the streets, or skulking in alleys.

But here—if they could believe their red-rimmed, popping eyes—were a pair of the true breed, four-legged, furry, back-stripers. It was early morning. A scattering of two-legged skunks were sunning themselves on benches along the walk. When the sudden appearance of two of their little four-legged brethren, racking serenely along, sent them scrambling indoors in panicky haste.

But still more incredible—if their bulging eyes were not lying—the two skunks were tagging closely the heels of a scrawny freckled, red-haired, pigtailed little girl, with a saucy, upslanted nose. She shuffled along, grinning slyly, dragging the toes of her high-topped, button shoes across the cracks in the planking, marvelling at the drumming cadence thus produced.

To strangers, unacquainted with the capricious Trixie, brown-eyed, twelve-year-old tomboy daughter of Lem Dawson, sheriff, the mere spectacle of an unescorted child walking the streets of this tough town was, in itself, startling.

Oldtimers, of course, were used to it. But even they stared, slack-eyed, at this, their first introduction to Pete and Petunia, Trixie's pet skunks. She had run onto them in her ramblings, and her lonely, pleasure-starved heart had instantly gone out to them. She toted them home and raised them up as pets.

Just now Trixie was headed for the old abandoned stamp mill in Haunted Gulch, where she frequently took the skunks mousing. But enroute a sudden inspiration had seized her. She was going to make an im-

TRIXIE—HELL-TOWN BUSTER!

portant request of her star-toting father.

They were passing the Half-A-Dollar Saloon when it happened.

A paunchy man in a gray checked suit, flowered vest, flowing tie, gray bowler, spats, and carrying a cane, pushed through the batwings, smacking his loose lips. He nearly stepped on Petunia.

Asa Goodloe, less than a year in Hellgate, gurgled a startled oath. Instinctively he kicked the little skunk, frantically clawed a small gun from under his coat.

It was a mistake.

Petunia, surprised, deeply aggrieved, also reacted instinctively. She recovered, tensed herself, fired both barrels, and her aim was good.

Asa choked off a scream, and dropped his gun.

Trixie whirled, clamped her nose, and shrilled: "Petunia! Behave yourself. Shame on you!"

Asa was fighting to shed his polluted outer raiment, and proceeded to lose his drinks, breakfast and dignity. The air for a block around became clogged with the stifling odor. Doors banged. Windows slammed. Hoarse voices yelled, and bootheels pounded. Horses snorted and broke loose from hitchrails, stampeding out of town.

Trixie didn't tarry. Gasping, she churned away, the pets hot on her heels. Pausing under the sheriff's office window, only a faint odor reached her. Petunia rubbed against her leg, herself almost unscented. As Trixie hesitated, the worried voices of her dad and Goose Peters, head deputy, drifted out. Apparently the commotion hadn't penetrated their harried thoughts.

"It's got me plumb bejiggered," her dad's voice growled. "The immigration fellers insist Japs are bein' smuggled acrost in this territory. Blamed if I believe it. We watch Devil's Pass too close. But they're hollerin' their heads off at El Paso, threatenin' to cancel my commission less'n I plug the hole."

Trixie, listening, remembered vaguely that while Lem's official status was high sheriff of the county, he also held some kind of special commission from the Immigration authorities to patrol this snaky section of the border.

Goose, the bandy-legged, bug-eyed head deputy snorted, "How could they sneak past us? Devil's Pass is the only way out'n that hell-hole; and me and Val watch that trail constant." Val Spencer was second deputy.

Trixie waited no longer. Tensing, she erupted through the open door, flung onto her astonished parent's lap, wrapped her bony arms around his neck. "E-eck!" she shrieked. "Save me, Pa. There's two big old black pant'ers chasin' me!"

LEM only grinned. But the nervous deputy lurched upward, clawing for his gun. Then he grinned sickishly as Pete and Petunia ambled in. "Aw, heck," he mumbled. "You're allus a hoorawin' somebody." He frowned wryly as the potent pets pattered to the vacant cells, scenting mice.

Middle-aged, slight, mild-mannered, mustached, leathery Lem Dawson winked a pale blue eye, fondly stroked his daughter's head.

"What's plaguin' your mind, Kitten? I know the signs—you want sumpum." He teasingly chucked her under the chin.

Trixie sighed wistfully. "It's about us kids, Pa; there's no place for us to play, like the pitchers I've seen in the big city newspapers. I've been thinkin' if you'd donate that busted-up five-acre plot you won in a poker game, maybe we could somehow fix it up into a sort of playground."

The lawman's bantering manner changed. He always choked up inside at the guilty reminder that kids, in this land of cactus, canyons and cussedness, had a tough life. All entertainment catered to tough men—or tougher women. Saloons, card hells, dance hall dives. Nothing for decent women, or lonely kids. Even the school ran only spasmodically. His eyes filmed as he reflected that it was one hell of a country where a companion-starved younker had to tame polecats to have a pet to play with.

He snorted into his bandana, had to push the words past a lump in his throat. "You dang tootin', Honey," he said huskily. "I'll make over that plot to you, with me as trustee, since you're a minor, and we'll make this town ante up money to fix it."

It was a rash promise, he realized. But it pleased Trixie. She pecked his frost-fringed bald spot, slid down and skipped over to the rickety old typewriter on a wobbly table. With bony forefingers she stabbed out, over and over, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy gray dog."

The magic writing machine fascinated Trixie. She was always practicing on it. She had attended regular school very little. But she was actually better educated than most grown-ups hereabouts. Her ma, a schoolmarm before her marriage, had taught her at home. Besides, Trixie, hungry for knowledge, had read every book she could find, from *Mother Goose* to Bullfinch's *Age Of Fable*. And that wasn't counting certain cheap novels, sticky with romance, which her wrathful ma promptly burned when she found them, even if Trixie hadn't read them more than six times.

Banging away, Trixie's big ears scooped up vagrant snatches of sound: a mouse's death squeak in the rear, and then Goose's outraged denunciation:

"—It ain't right. That forked-tongued Asa Goodloe fixin' to foreclose a mortgage on that purty little black-maned Sally Sutton's Bon Ton lunch room, back on Silver Street. Why? Because, them surveyor fellers for the new railroad staked out a depot site right acrost from her place. It'll make it a gold mine—jest right fur a railroad eatin' house. He slick-talked her into lettin' the loan slide along, knowin' she was skimpin' to send money to her sick ma, down in Santone. Then, like a buzzard watchin' a crippled rabbit, he swooped down. It's plumb self-obvious. Orter be a law—and her such a purty little filly; cuter'n a chipmonk's ear."

Lem grunted, "Yeah; too bad she ain't old and fat. Reckon you'd think it was all right, then. 'Tain't mislegal. Nothin' we can do."

Goose glared and snorted.

Trixie was disturbed. Sally Sutton was her friend. She thrilled Trixie with tales of that wonderful outside world and gorged her with those heavenly, hot spiced apple pies. Sally always saved meat scraps for Pete and Petunia—and loaned her those throbbing, romantic books which Trixie devoured, starry-eyed, on the sly.

Thoughtfully, Trixie got down from the typewriter, loathing the scheming Asa more than ever. She smacked her dad's parchment cheek, whistled to Pete and Petunia, and left.

The old stamp mill was beyond a mesquite and pear-studded ridge, at the mouth of a box canyon, a quarter mile from town. Unused for years, weeds and brush crowded up close to its rotting walls.

Shuffling along, Trixie's brow furrowed. She pondered the smuggling puzzle which plagued her dad, scowled over the disaster which threatened Sally. The town of Hellgate sprawled at the foot of Devil's Pass. Beyond the Pass, over the frowning Chisos, and skirted by the churning Rio Grande, lay a wild, broken region, peopled by renegades of many stripes and races. The only known Texas outlet was the treacherous Devil's Pass switchback. A conscientious peace officer like Lem Dawson could—and did—keep the snaky denizens of that hellhole hideout from spilling out to hell and gone. Trixie, considering this, couldn't figure how anybody could slip through that closely guarded niche.

Asa Goodloe, she recollected, had appeared about a year ago, and hung out a law shingle. But from talk dropped here and there, she gathered that mostly his business was making loans, charging usurious interest, and furnishing bail bonds for outlaws from over in the badlands.

In his forties, flabby-jowled, he affected a pious, obsequious front that, to Trixie, had a phony ring.

Buried in thought, she approached the old mill, and was nearing the big double doors when she brought up suddenly, startled by a strange babble of low talk from within. Warily, she grabbed up Pete and Petunia, hesitated a moment, undecided. Memory clicked then, bringing little remembered snatches of talk that a company had bought the old mill, planned to repair it and put it back in operation. Tardily, she noted the trampled ground, gutted by wheel tracks.

The voices, she decided, came from foreign laborers. That was natural since most mining companies favored this cheap labor.

She was turning to slip silently away when the door flung noisily open. A huge, terrifying creature burst out. An enormous man stood there. He was long armed, thick-chested and hairy-faced. A frightful scar gashed his left cheek, twisting his mouth hideously, baring big yellow tusks.

He advanced menacingly, little red pig eyes glaring. Trixie, paralyzed momentarily, couldn't move.

"What're yuh doin' here, brat?" he croaked. "Kids ain't wanted around here." He leered, "Reckon I'll jest bite yore head off'n eat yuh."

TRIXIE believed him. She tried to scream, couldn't. Thousands of years later she wrenched her feet unrooted, set them moving like pistons. At first she ran blindly. Direction meant nothing. Only speed—speed and distance counted. When finally, gasping, weak, she paused and dared to look back, she was far from the mill. Panting, exhausted, she tried to think. Was he an ogre, right out of *Puss In Boots?* Or maybe a hant, like her grammaw swore she'd seen in Haunted Gulch, toting their heads tucked under arm? Or was it just the usual hostility of the new mill owners towards kids?

She rounded a boulder, came abruptly upon a young man. Only then did she realize, that she was at about the middle of the plot she had coaxed from her dad for a playground. The young man was staring through glasses toward the distant Chisos. Trixie coughed politely. He whirled, startled, confused. At sight of the gangling girl, a skunk snugged under each arm, his brown eyes widened, his jaw fell.

"Oh, hullo," he stammered, grinning uncertainly.

Trixie noted his nice, toothy smile. "Howdy-do," she returned, set the pets carefully down. She knew him, now. She'd seen him lounging in front of the Star Hotel. Goose had announced that he called himself a arkyollygist, but he wasn't sure whether it denoted citizenship in Arkansaw, trade or politics.

"I'm Dave Girder," he announced gravely, and Trixie divulged her own name. Picks, shovels, and a various assortment of queer thingumjigs were strewn about. Dave was a six-footer, hatless, with broad shoulders tapering to slim hips. His sun-faded brown hair was wavy, and clear eyes were flanked by humorous crinkles. The bronze face was clean cut. A khaki shirt was open at the neck, and he wore high-laced boots outside tan ducking pants. He reminded Trixie of a Greek hombre called Apollo who was quite a lover in his day.

Dave picked up a piece of pottery with queer markings. "Look," he pointed, "it's very old. Shows an ancient civilization once thrived here."

Trixie was unenthused over a busted bowl handle, the like of which she'd kicked around all her life. "Lots of that junk hereabouts," she said. "I know a cave where there's whole jugs. Even complete skeletons."

Dave stared. "Say now, that's real interestin'. How about showin' me to it?"

Trixie nodded. "Reckon maybe I could. But it's quite a hike. We couldn't go today."

She was measuring this nice young man with sudden inspiration. She felt a queer longing to be older. As old as Sally Sutton, maybe. Pretty, and unfreckled, too. Maybe a bit plumper here and there, like Sally. That improbable premise evolved naturally into the next best thing—to bring Dave and Sally together. Sally, so lovely and kind and lonely, with few beaus in her own class.

She sighed regretfully. If romance was beyond the reach of her years, then she could contrive at least a vicarious thrill. But first, what bait? Then she remembered, "The way to a man's heart—"

"You like hot, spiced apple pies?" she blurted. "A friend of mine bakes 'em divine, and I'm on my way to get a hunk."

"Why," he replied, surprised, "Apple pie is my one weakness. Sure, I'll side you."

He followed her. Sally's place overlooked the plot. Enroute Trixie let fly a few honey-tipped arrows. "Sally," she divulged, "is awfully beautiful and romantic and her pies are terribly gorgeous."

Dave smiled. "Why, now, that's great."

At this hour the Bon Ton had no customers. Pete and Petunia scampered to the kitchen. A moment later Sally came out, laughing. "I knew it was you, Trix, when your horrible playmates came frisking back. I—Oh, dear me!" She broke off, flustered, glimpsing Dave.

She dabbed a smudge of flour from her nose.

Dave stared, obviously astonished, grinned, nodded approvingly.

Trixie gravely introduced them.

"My little new-found friend here's a magician," Dave said. "One minute she's got my heart turning handsprings; next instant my mouth's watering, my stomach begging. Now that I see the first part wasn't exaggfierated, I can hardly wait."

Sally blushed. When she set out the pies, Trixie watched both, between bites, critically. She frowned, disappointed. In that sweet sad love tale, *Hearts Entwined,* it had been love at first sight between Reginald Gallant and angelic Alice Ardent. Reg had knelt, kissed her hand, gushed husky protestations of adoration, and they were betrothed in ten minutes.

But Dave and Sally were laughing, chatting impersonally. It was disgusting. She stared sadly through the window, into space.

Her vision encompassed Dave's piled equipment, some three hundred yards distant. Absently, she noted that directly in line, and a few feet from the lunch room, stood one of the grade stakes for the new railroad. That revived angry remembrance of scheming Asa Goodloe and Sally's tragedy. Thenceforth, it was only natural that the seed of an idea should swell, germinate, sprout and flourish in a brain of Trixie's vast imaginative capacity.

She smiled grimly, nodded, slid from her stool, whistled for the pets. She eyed Dave pityingly and said coldly, "I'll meet you at your diggin's this afternoon, let you know about the cave trip."

Puzzled, indulgent smiles followed her as she trudged away, a small, lonely figure in a harsh, grownup world.

AN HOUR later, following lunch, found Trixie in front of the old typewriter, brows wrinkled, poring over a dictionary. It took a long, painful time to compose the letter, but at last she finished. Then she read it :

Mr. Dave Girder,
Hellgate, Texas.
Dear Dave:

Our ruse, posing you as an archaeologist, while you quietly stake out the genuine surveys for the line, is turning out to be smart poker. With the first crew making those fake surveys ahead of you, our land buyers find no trouble in following you, optioning right-of-way at fair prices, outsmarting the unsuspecting speculators. The boys will arrive soon, so be sure and have the secret markings ready, especially for the five-acre shop site and yards. Burn this letter, as usual. Good luck!

J. Montague Smith,
Chief Engineer, Border & Western Railways.

She knew where to find the envelope addressed to her dad concerning some routine matter, and bearing the railroad's printed return. Painstakingly erasing "Lem Dawson" she substituted "Mr. Dave Girder," inserted her counterfeited letter, slipped out nervously.

Only then did demon doubt rear its ugly head. She couldn't afford a single mis-step. She hovered in an alley, a dozen paces from the stairway leading to Goodloe's office. Ages later, she heard his heavy, descending footfalls. She peeked cautiously, saw him pause a moment, frown, sniff wryly the still lingering scent. He had changed clothes completely. Asa turned, headed for the Half-A-Dollar Saloon, and Trixie, poised, tense, acted.

Bent over, letter gripped in a fist, she skidded around the corner, and before astonished Asa could sidestep, she slammed into him, head ramming his paunch. He sat down hard. Breath wheezed out in a strangled grunt.

Trixie bounced back, letting the letter fall to the walk. The lawyer, gasping, struggled up, fists clenched, purple faced. "You little wretch!" he gritted. "I oughta shake your teeth out. Twice in one day—it's too much."

Trixie backed away, wide eyed. "O-ooh, mister," she stammered, "I'm awfully sorry. "You see—I was hurrying to overtake Mr. Girder—" She pointed numbly to the letter which luckily landed, face up.

Asa's beady eyes followed her finger, narrowed cunningly. He stooped, palmed the letter, started with surprise as he read the names. His manner underwent swift transformation.

"Tut, tut, child," he purred. "Afraid I succumbed to my nasty temper. Accident, sure." He smiled, patted her head. "I'll hand this to Dave myself. No bother."

He pocketed the bogus missive, hurried away.

Trixie gulped, smothered a snicker. It had worked. And from here on, she suspected, Dave's movements would be closely watched.

Proof followed quickly. Later, through Sally's window, she watched Dave, poking about in the ruins of the ancient Indian village.

He measured, ran lines, jotted notes in a big book. And presently she glimpsed Asa's plug hat over a chapparal. He watched Dave greedily. Shortly afterward he slunk away and Trixie, trailing, saw him hurry for the county recorder's office, obviously to check ownership plats.

Trixie, elated, returned, informed Dave she would guide him to Skull Cave the following day.

She loitered until she saw Asa head for the sheriff's office and followed a minute behind him.

Asa frowned annoyance at her entrance.

"Sheriff," he announced carelessly, "happens a client of mine wants a small, cheap factory site here. Figured you would welcome the chance to unload that worthless plot on the south side at a good price—say a hundred dollars."

Lem dropped his feet from the desk. He peered closely at Asa. Then, swiveling, he stared penetratingly at Trixie. She dropped her head. His eyes asked, "What's this monkey business, Kitten?" She lifted her gaze innocently ceilingward.

Lem sighed, drawled, "Nope, reckon not. Fact is, I'm deedin' that over to my dotter here. She figgers to fix it up for a kid park."

Asa looked stunned, glared suspiciously at Trixie. Then, recovering, he crooned, "Ah, yes, Trixie. A pretty child. Clever, too. For that sum you could easily buy a more suitable site. Er, *hmmm*—in fact, for so worthy a cause I might even double the price—say two hundred, eh?"

Trixie wagged a negative. "No, sir, I guess not." Then, brightly, "That land is awful valuable. Worth maybe a million dollars. Or anyhow more'n a thousand."

Lem choked, coughed. Goodloe, strangling, exploded "Why, that's ridiculous. You're jesting." He appealed to Lem. "The child has no business sense. You, my good man, should handle this."

But Lem, curiosity whetted, was having too much fun. "Nope," he grunted, "reckon not. She won't never learn no younger."

Goodloe was getting panicky. He licked dry lips, swallowed. Sweat popped out. This little imp, he suspected, knew something. He had better close this deal quickly. Anyhow, he likely assured himself, he could hold the rail people up for ten times as much.

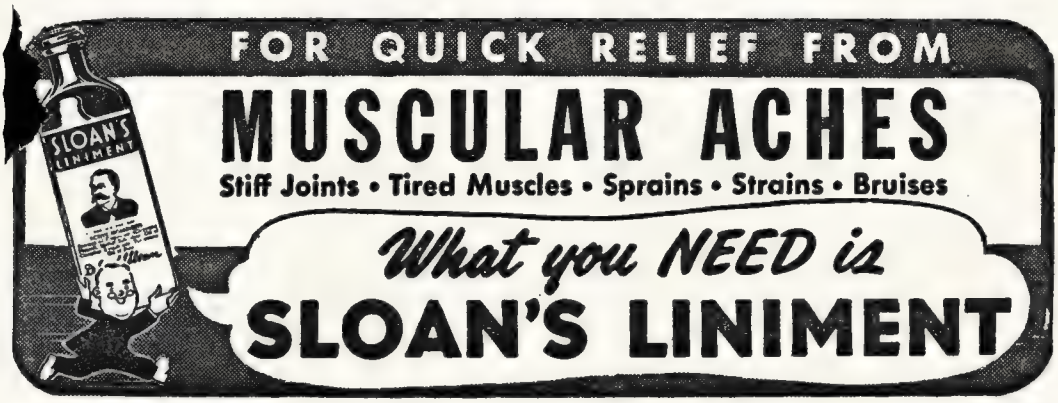
He clawed out a fat wallet. "It's foolish," he said thickly, "but my client wants that site. A thousand did you say, gal?"

"In cash," Trixie said, meekly, "and the note you hold against Sally Sutton, besides."

Asa spluttered, stared suspiciously, started to protest, changed his mind, feverishly counted out the cash with trembling hnads, shoved it at Lem. Then, from another pocket he drew the note signed by Sally, thrust it toward the sheriff.

The lawman's head was spinning, but he took it poker-faced. "You're a lawyer," he said weakly. "Fix up the papers and I'll sign over for Trixie."

Goodloe stomped out. The sheriff slumped in his chair, fanned himself with hat. "Honey," he gasped, "don't try to tell me now, but sometime, when I'm stronger, explain what you're up to, will you?"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Trixie giggled, "Yes, Pa," pecked the end of his nose, snatched up the promissory note, dashed out, and skipped joyously to Sally's Place.

SHE found that young lady deeply preoccupied. Dave was leaning over the counter, both Saly's hands clasped in his own. Their heads were close together. Sally's face had the delicate blush of a ripe peach, and Dave's tanned face was pleasurably flushed.

Trixie had to cough twice before they started guiltily, broke away. She solemnly tore the note in two, handed it to the flustered Sally, announced, "I want to pay, in advance, for five hundred dollars worth of apple pie, to be et a slab at a time."

Sally stared mutely at the instrument. She opened her mouth to shape a question. But before she could speak Trixie ran out the door and was gone.

Skull Cave was far up the east slope of the Chisos, a few hundred yards off Devil's Trail. It was past mid-day when, after eating lunches prepared by Sally, Trixie and Dave left the trail, pushed on through a dense cedar copse, and neared the cave's mouth.

Suddenly Trixie's sharp ears picked a sound from the air. She tensed, gripped Dave's arm, signalled for silence. A chattering of voices sounded ahead. They crept forward cautiously then, Trixie leading. When, a moment later they peered out through parted cedar branches toward the cave, a strange sight met their eyes.

A big wagon, of the type used for hauling ore, was backed up close to the cave entrance. Another waited close by. A whiskery, hard-eyed tough, wearing guns, stood at the back of the first wagon. He swore, "All right, yuh yaller heathens! Pile out and in, pronto!"

While they watched a huddle of jabbering Orientals were prodded into the wagon. It took a minute for Trixie's mind to digest the scene's significance. The high-sided wagons, she ascertained, were rigged with false, shallow tops. On these dummy, tray-like tops chunks of ore were heaped, but underneath there remained a spacious compartment into which the small men could be crowded.

Quickly the wagon was loaded, its rear gate closed, locked, and shunted to one side as the other wagon warped into loading position.

In addition to Whiskers, there were two hardcase drivers, belted and gunned. A moment later Whiskers growled, "Git rollin'. Keep to the trail and jest ack nacherl. As before the big boss who finances the deal'll be at the mill after dark to colleck his blood money. He'll pay us off, then we'll haul 'em to the desert 'n dump 'em."

Trixie pulled Dave back, thoughts backtrailing. She recalled that her friend, Joe Fire Shaker, an Apache, had hinted that the cave extended clear through the mountain. Few people knew of its existence.

At a safe distance she gushed out the whole story to Dave of how she'd tricked the wily shyster to save Sally, of her dad's embarrasment over the alien smuggling and her discovery at the stamp mill yesterday.

Dave only whistled softly, nodded grimly. Far from disappointed over delay, he seemed strangely excited, plied Trixie with a hundred questions.

Back on the trail they slipped into a live-oak clump, watched while the wagons, four-mule drawn, lumbered past.

It was nearing sunset when, leg weary, they reached Hellgate.

Lem and Goose, they found, were at supper. Dave turned off at Sally's Bon Ton, telling Trixie he'd meet the sheriff at the office. Shortly afterward Trixie was breathlessly detailing her discovery to her dad as he listened, eyes blinking, incredulous.

Fortunately for Trixie, her ma had already left for a church meeting. Lem didn't have the heart to deny his daughter the right to be in on the final roundup. "You can go along," he told her reluctantly, "but keep back, out of danger."

They met Goose and Dave and by the time they reached the edge of the growth crowding the old mill, thick dusk was pooling in the gulch. Slivers of lights, probably from a cook fire, fingered through wide cracks. A buzz of garbled chatter reached them where they waited to size up the situation.

From within a harsh voice bawled, "Simmer down, yuh slant-eyed sons. Now line up and git yore money ready."

And then Trixie heard a sirupy voice, soothing, unmistakable. "Inform the gentlemen this represents the final half of the

five hundred dollar fee, after which we shall escort them onward." It was, undoubtedly, Asa Goodloe's voice.

Lem disposed Goose at the back, whispering instructions. After which, waving Trixie back, he sent two quick shots, aimed high, into the big doors.

Instant silence ensued as Lem reloaded. Then, into this soundless void he threw his ragged bellow: "All right, you in there—we got you surrounded. Come out with your hands h'isted, and no monkey business."

More silence. A throaty curse. Followed by low, muttered consultation.

Then, "Go to Hell, yuh creaky old badge toter! Yuh're bluffin'."

Lem sighed heavily. Trapped as they were, he hadn't expected resistance.

Into this sigh-punctuated hesitation, Trixie, crouched behind an old boiler, read regret that there hadn't been time to gather a posse.

Suddenly she froze.

She glimpsed the tiny, shadowy form of a mouse dart across a wide light band, headed for the building. But what tore the gasp from her numb throat was sight of the mouse's pursuers—the silver-striped, bushy-tailed forms of Pete and Petunia. In the excitement she hadn't realized they'd followed her. An instant later the trio vanished in a hole in the corner of the wall.

IT WAS like hell busting loose then, except the fumes weren't sulphurous. There was first a scream, then a sodden sound, like a boot kicking a squashy object. The air thickened with the powerful stench. The doors broke loose against the press of crazed, stampeding humanity. Five men, including Asa, were first, pushed by the panicky yellow tide behind.

But they managed to stumble out, choking, with guns in hand. The scream of lead, shrieks, powdersmoke and skunk stink filled the gulch.

Trixie saw Dave stalk straight toward the blazing guns, triggering. She saw Whiskers go down followed by another renegade. Meantime, Lem shot it out with a third gunslick at close range and won. But in the maneuver he brought up with his back exposed to the snarling Goodloe. Leering, he was carefully lining his derringer between the lawman's shoulder blades when Goose came skidding around the corner.

He gasped. Then, without wasting time to aim and trigger, he slammed down hard with gun barrel on Asa's arm. Asa screamed as bone cracked.

Trixie tried to scream then as she saw the Ogre, grinning fiendishly, advance on Dave, gun slamming. Dave, white-faced, teetered to meet him. Dave flinched, and when, an instant later the giant sagged earthward, Dave grinned foolishly, swayed and toppled too.

That was all. Save for Asa Goodloe's whining voice, it was very still.

Lem sighed. Goose's saucer eyes widened to platters, he opened his mouth, closed it. Trixie wept softly.

Then, from town, came shouts and the drum of many feet, as townsmen poured into the gulch. A slim, raven-haired girl led them. She flew straight to the prostrate Dave, cradled his head in her arm, sobbed his name.

But kneeling, she saw, with joy, that Dave wasn't dead. He grinned, said weakly, "O, hullo there, kids. Got a chunk of fire in my side is all."

With Sally's help he pulled to a sitting position. In a flood of released feeling Trixie started to laugh hysterically. "Mister," she heard herself say, "Why don't you kiss the gal? In the book she'd 've got bussed good and plenty before now."

Dave grinned. "Not a bad idea, at all." An arm pulled the unresisting, blushing Sally close and he kissed her as Trixie studied the technique.

Asa Goodloe's grating whine broke the magic spell. "You! And those filthy little beasts!" His hate-filled eyes bored into Trixie. Then to Dave, "Tell me one thing: Are you a railroad surveyor, Girder?"

Dave laughed. "Heck, no! No more than you, Ace Guhldall, are Asa Goodloe. Nor am I an archaeologist." He fished out a badge. "Immigration headquarters sent me to work on this case."

Dave stroked Trixie's hair. "Honey, there's a tidy reward for Ace Guhldall here, notorious smuggler. 'Spect, with what you've already pried from him it'll be enough to fix a swell kid's playground, with swings, slides and swimming pool."

Perdition Trail-Drive

By GENE KIVETT

Through that hell-hot, desert furnace, Charlie Goodnight shoved his thirst-maddened herd, to blaze a new trail out from Texas—and a new high mark in cattleman courage!

"CHARLIE GOODNIGHT had the courage of a mountain lion, the physical endurance of a pack mule, and the vision of an explorer!"

Thus spoke Oliver Loving of his old saddle-mate. And Loving, himself a two-fisted fighting man and pioneer cattle rancher, did not exaggerate. The hard, uncompromising history of the West reveals clearly that Charlie Goodnight had these virtues, and more besides.

After the Civil War was over and Texas men began returning home, Goodnight foresaw the course of history. He knew that the cattlemen would start driving their herds north to the railroad points, to be shipped to the Northern markets.

The Northern markets would soon be flooded, and consequently prices would be low. Then why not, he asked himself, establish a new market? Why not drive his herd West?

Goodnight went to several neighboring cattlemen, told them of his plan, asked them to join in and drive West with him.

"Why, man, you're crazy!" they told him. "We'd never get our cattle through. The country's swarming with hostile Comanche and Kiowa Injuns!"

"But we won't take a direct route and drive through the Indian territory," Goodnight explained. "We'll go around the Indian country by going due southwest along the old Butterfield Trail till we reach the Pecos River. Then we'll follow the river north to the Rockies, and parallel the mountains northward."

But the cattlemen refused to join him. They pointed out the many hazards, the fact that the country through which Goodnight proposed to drive was wild and little known. It was mostly desert country, with few water holes. There was one stretch in particular—eighty miles of burning desert—without a drop of water.

The cattlemen maintained that there wasn't a cow in Texas that could cross that waterless hell-hole and come out alive.

Goodnight, however, was undaunted. He believed he could drive across the desert and reach the Pecos without losing a head of stock. Finally, he found a man who was willing to risk his cattle on the hazardous drive. This was Oliver Loving, a hard-bitten man of fifty-four.

"Hell," Loving said, "I'd rather take a chance of losing my entire herd than drive north and sell at give-away prices!"

The two men then set about making preparations. Goodnight had a chuck-wagon built of the toughest wood to be had, well seasoned *bois d'arc*. The axles were of iron instead of the usual wood. This was the first chuck-wagon ever seen in the West, and those that are used to this day are built on the same design.

Loving moved his cattle in with the Goodnight herd. Together there were over two thousand head. Counting the two owners, there were eighteen men to drive the herd.

AND then on June 6, 1866, they pointed the cattle Westward and began the momentous drive. Two punchers rode at the point and kept the herd on the course. Behind these rode the other hands, holding the cattle together. Far in the lead, Goodnight scouted ahead, searching for water holes, grazing range, and bedding grounds.

For many days along the Butterfield Trail the going was easy. They made from twelve to fifteen miles a day, which is a fair days drive for a mixed herd. Many calves were born en route, but since they had no calf-wagon, they had to destroy them.

When finally they reached the headwaters of the Middle Concho, they stopped to let the herd get a good fill. Ahead of them stretched the eighty miles of parched desert. They held the cattle on the Concho for a whole day, until they would drink no more. Then at dusk they pointed the herd into

The crazed herd stampeded through the canyon. . . .

the eighty-mile furnace. Crossing it was the supreme test. It would make or break them!

They drove until late, camped and held the herd for a time on the hot sand. But the dry cattle bellowed and milled so that the eighteen men had to stay in the saddle to hold them.

Next morning when they moved on, Goodnight told his partner: "This camping will never do. Those cows walked enough last night to have crossed this desert. We'll have to keep driving straight through—without stopping!"

They drove on that day, the weary cattle becoming more thirst-crazed with each mile. The scorching sun beat down, and the white dust rose in great clouds to further torture the tired, sleepy cowpunchers. Soon their canteens were dry, and the water barrels were empty. The men's lips cracked open with the heat and the brine.

The dry cattle began to lag, and the hands riding drag had all they could do to keep the weak cows on the go. Mingled with the men's shouts and curses was the roar of the herd bawling for water. Their ribs stuck out, gaunt and drawn, and their slobbering tongues hung down, often dragging in the hot alkali dust.

Goodnight, dead tired and tortured with thirst, kept circling the slowly moving herd, directing here, lending a hand there.

Night fell, and they drove on through the ghostly moonlight. About two o'clock in the morning, they reached Castle Canyon, through which a damp breeze was blowing. Thinking they scented water, the crazed cattle stampeded madly through the canyon. The riders raced after them, headed the leaders off and managed to hold them in check for a while.

But sniffing the cool breeze, the cattle soon became unmanageable. They broke lose and thundered wildly forward. Finally, the men gave up trying to check them and merely raced along with the roaring herd.

Near daylight the running cattle and men reached the end of the waterless eighty-mile stretch, and came in sight of the Pecos River. The maddened herd speeded up and thundered headlong into the swirling stream. Those behind shoved the leaders across the river before they had time to stop and drink. It was a mad din of bellowing and clattering horns as the frantic herd rushed in to slake their fiery thirsts.

Up above the cattle, the eighteen weary men sprawled on bellies and drank the cool river water.

Goodnight made camp there on the Pecos. The worst of the drive was over.

Goodnight had proven that a herd could be driven over the eighty-mile desert. He was proud of the accomplishment—proud that he had blazed the way for the hundreds of herds that would follow in his tracks—over the Goodnight Trail!

For ordinary parties the Fiddler's plaintive music brought honest tears to the eyes of rugged, bearded miners, but when that dreamy-eyed musicman was invited to be guest of honor at his own hang-noose shindig, he fittingly composed his own swan-song—with a specially arranged Boothill obligatto!

HE WAS the Fiddler. Everybody called him that—the Fiddler. Nobody knew he had any other name, and he never gave any other. Just the Fiddler. He was a tall, lank, loose-jointed lad with a long, narrow face and long, honey-colored hair. There was something a little queer about his eyes, but the queerness in them was only caused by their unusual brightness, as if he were always seeing something beautiful that no one else could see.

He was working for Jake Bowler at Acorn Flats. Jake had the saloon and dance hall. Most of the time there weren't any women in Acorn Flats, but the miners danced anyway. They danced with each other. Those who had patches on the seats of their pants counted as ladies and the others asked them to dance and after each dance bought the drinks for them.

There were times when it paid to have a patch on your pants in Acorn Flats.

One day the Fiddler went to Jake Bowler and said, "I guess I'll be leavin' you, Jake. I been here a month now. That's a long time."

Jake's eyes narrowed. Jake was a big man with a huge middle. He was dressed like any of the miners, only he didn't get his blue pants and his red shirt dirty in any creek bottom.

THE FIDDLER PLAYS THE DEAD-MAN'S JIG

By J. LANE LINKLATER

Jake didn't want to lose the Fiddler. There was no one to take his place, for he was good. On the strings of his battered old instrument, he could call up every feeling known to man. Jake knew it was the Fiddler who kept his place crowded every night. If it were not for him, most of the boys would go on over to Stubby Creek, which was only four miles away, just the other side of Lonesome Hill.

Jake leaned his hairy forearms on his bar and said, "What's the matter, Fiddler? Ain't I payin' you plenty?"

"Enough," said the Fiddler. "That ain't it."

Jake knew that wasn't it. The Fiddler didn't care about the pay. He got his food and a place to sleep and a pinch of gold dust every day. The pinch of dust was as much as he could get between his forefinger and thumb—the price of one drink anywhere along the Mother Lode country.

The Fiddler didn't care about anything else. He liked to play his fiddle and he liked to wander around looking at the hills —that's all, just fiddle and wander and look at the glory of the hills.

Jake Bowler had no intention of letting the Fiddler go if he could help it. He'd been expecting this. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it, Fiddler." He pretended that it really didn't matter to him. "But how 'bout stayin' two-three days more, jest as a favor to me?"

"I don't know," said the Fiddler.

The Fiddler liked to do favors, but once it got into him that he ought to be moving, it took something special to keep him.

Jake Bowler said, "I got to go over to Placerville. Special business. Take me two-three days. I'd like for you to stay 'til I get back."

"All right," answered the Fiddler. "Just two-three days."

Jake grinned, pleased with his own cunning. He went to Placerville. When he came back he had a young woman with him.

ANNA BLAINE was a plain girl, just a healthy girl of twenty who didn't go in for frills. She had a nice soft-curved face with gentle brown eyes, but she was plain. She'd do all right in Acorn Flats, though. There were no women in Acorn Flats.

Jake told the Fiddler, "Anna is goin' to dance and sing. She's an actress. She was with a troupe, playin' over at Placerville. I got her to come here for a spell. You tell her what to do, Fiddler, and then you can vamoose, if you've a mind to."

The Fiddler took Anna for a walk. They passed the small shack about fifty yards from the saloon, where the stage stopped on its way to Sacramento every Saturday night.

Anna was shy and she was honest. She told the Fiddler, "I'm supposed to sing and dance, but I'm not really a good singer or a good dancer."

It was dark, and the moon was pushing up over the High Sierras, to the east. The Fiddler didn't need any more than the light of the moon to find his way around. They had come to a fallen tree which he had often sat on before.

"Sit on this here tree, Anna, and tell me."

Anna sat down. "My mother has been dead a long time. My dad was a miner. He had a claim 'way up around Chinese Camp, but a few months ago he was drowned in a flood. I have a small brother, Will, who was living with me in Sacramento. Will is only nine years old, so I have to make a living for both of us. A theatrical troupe came up from San Francisco to play the biggest camps. They needed a girl, so they hired me. But then they picked up another girl, much prettier than I, and a better dancer. From Placerville they were going to send me back to Sacramento."

"That was where Jake found you?"

"Yes. He offered me this job. He said he'd pay me well to come here."

"He should pay you high," the Fiddler said. "It's a hard life for a girl."

Anna said anxiously, "If I'm to sing and dance, I'll need someone to play the music for me."

"I told Jake I was leavin'," the Fiddler said uneasily.

"I know. He wanted me to get you to stay. He said for me not to let on I was doing that, but I can't do it his way. I have to tell you straight out. If you go, I have no job. If you stay, Jake will pay me twenty ounces of gold a month. In a few months I'll be able to go back to Sacramento and maybe start a business."

The Fiddler stared broodingly into the darkness. He had never before met with such a problem. Always he had been able to pick up his fiddle and just walk away. That was his way of life. Other men liked to scour the creek bottoms for gold, or buy and sell, or drink and gamble. But all the Fiddler knew was his fiddle and the rolling hills and the lonesome trails.

Presently the Fiddler said, "I'll stay and play for you. Jest one month."

The Fiddler stayed to fiddle in Jake Bowler's place while Anna danced and sang. It was a fine stroke of business for Jake.

As Anna had said, she had no great skill as a dancer or singer, but the boys didn't mind that. And before long she was doing much better. Maybe it was the unspoken coaching the Fiddler gave her. It was as if she began to find it difficult to dance and sing poorly to such beautiful music.

She even began to look prettier. The Fiddler's music may have had something to do with that, too, but not everything. Young Slim Paxton came in every night, and no one in camp did a more thorough job of cleaning and primping before he put his head in Jake's door.

It was the understanding that Anna danced for the boys—but she didn't have to dance with them. Most of them were pretty good about it, and even when Anna made an exception of Slim, well—that was her affair, and Slim's. They all liked Slim, anyway. He was a tall, shy youth from Missouri.

There was no trouble at all about it until one night a stranger came in. He was a big man. There was no mud on his clothes. He bought a round of drinks and introduced himself as Ned Sloan, of Angel's Camp and other points. He was, he said, just looking around. Might buy a good prospect if he saw one.

But the first prospect he saw was Anna. Sloan couldn't keep his eyes off Anna when she danced.

As soon as Anna was through, she sat down on a box in the corner. She knew that in a few minutes Slim would conquer his shyness enough to leave the bar and go to her. It always took Slim a few minutes—but it didn't take Sloan any time at all.

Sloan strode over. The Fiddler saw that. He also saw Slim, still at the bar, color angrily.

This might easily be a fight, a killing. Slim was far from vicious, but he was a Missourian and would stop at nothing in a case like this. Like all the rest of the boys, Slim had a six-shooter at his side and a bowie knife dangling from his belt at the back. Sloan had the same, except that he had two guns instead of one.

Quickly, The Fiddler struck up a tune, *Weep on the Mountain*. Anna took the hint, glanced gratefully at the Fiddler and started to tell Sloan that she had to sing now.

But the Fiddler heard Sloan say, "No, little gal. You c'n dance with me now."

"I can't do that," Anna said hastily.

"Sure you can."

Slim was leaving the bar and walking toward them. Just then Sloan took Anna's arm and walked her over to the Fiddler.

"Fiddler," Sloan said confidently, "play me and the lady a good dance tune."

THE Fiddler was still playing *Weep on the Mountain.* Now he stopped and looked up. He also looked across at the bar and noticed that Jake Bowler wasn't there. He was probably in his room at the back. The Fiddler had no illusions about Jake. He didn't like him, but he knew that Jake was both ready and able to stop any shooting in his place if he had a little warning.

Sloan demanded impatiently, "Play up, Fiddler!"

The Fiddler's smile was child-like. "How would this do?"

He played a few bars of *Juanita.*

"Too slow," complained Sloan. Play—"

"Take your dirty hands off'n the lady's arm," a low voice broke in.

Slim Paxton's lean young face was taut with rage. The burly Sloan turned and glared at him. Sloan dropped his hand on a gun and Slim went for his.

"No! No!" cried Anna. "Don't fight over me! Please—"

But it looked as if it was too late; Sloan's gun was out of his holster.

A huge hand cut down on Sloan's arm then, and Jake Bowler pushed between them. Jake grunted, "No shootin' in here, gents. If you hanker to kill each other, git outside!"

The miners crowded about, but this was a personal matter, so they did not interfere.

Quickly, the Fiddler sang out, "Take yore partners for a three-step polka!"

It was a small thing, but just enough to break the tension. The Fiddler played with gusto. The miners shouted and grabbed each other, jostling Slim and Sloan.

Sloan and Slim still stared at each other, but most of the strain was gone. Anna's hand on Slim's arm was urging him away. Sloan muttered sullenly, but in a moment Slim and Anna were dancing.

Sloan turned to Jake. "Say," he said, "how come you showed up here so quick?"

Jake grinned. "When there's trouble out here, the Fiddler just plays a few bars of

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Juanita. I hear it, and out I come." He chuckled. "Me and the Fiddler is smart."

Sloan glared at the Fiddler. "Yeh," he said, "maybe the Fiddler is too smart."

"You mean anything by that?" queried Jake.

"Sure. Ask the Fiddler if he was ever at Deacon Hill."

Jake shrugged. "Was you ever at Deacon Hill, Fiddler?"

The Fiddler, still playing for the dancers, merely nodded.

Jake squinted at Sloan. "Well, what about it?"

"A while back," Sloan said, "an hombre there, name of Dykes, had his can of dust stolen." Sloan jabbed a finger at the Fiddler. "He was around there, aplayin' his fiddle, but right after he was gone."

"The Fiddler and the dust disappeared at the same time?"

Sloan grinned. "Sure."

Jake Bowler peered at the Fiddler uneasily. He might have been thinking of his own store of gold dust. But the Fiddler didn't seem to be thinking of anything except the music he was playing, as if he were carried away by the beauty of his own harmony.

FOR days after that, Ned Sloan was around Acorn Flats. In the daytime he went poking around the hills and creeks, looking at the men working their claims.

One evening, Anna said to the Fiddler, timidly, "You don't ask me to go for walks you any more, Fiddler."

The Fiddler smiled. "Mebbe," he said, "it wouldn't be fair to Slim. Slim has to work hard all day, and mebbe it would hurt him if you went walking with me while he was working to make enough money to—"

"I know," cut in Anna, hurriedly. Her eyes blinked, as if there was something she wasn't sure about. "Slim is fine, but I—I—"

She didn't finish. The door had swung open and Slim himself was coming in. Slim pretended at first that he didn't see Anna, and walked over to the bar. He always did that, being bashful. The Fiddler understood. He understood, too, what was puzzling Anna. Anna was very fond of Slim, but she was also fond of the Fiddler, and she couldn't get her feelings straightened out.

Then the Fiddler said suddenly, "Mebbe, though, if you're of a mind to, we c'n go walkin' tomorrow."

The Fiddler and Anna went walking in the morning. They walked along the grassy hillsides. The sunlight dripped through the leaves of the oak trees and made moving spots of yellow on the grass. Presently they came to the banks of a stream.

"Oh," said Anna, "there's Slim!"

"This is his claim," said the Fiddler. "He has two men working for him."

"Yes," said Anna. "One of them is Missouri Bill."

She knew Missouri Bill because he was a special friend of Slim's. He was an older man, short and chubby, who shared Slim's cabin.

Slim and the other men were busy down in the water.

Slim saw them and waved. They were working on a wing dam. Thus the stream, which was over twenty feet wide, had been pushed off of half its bed. It roared by on the half still permitted it, swirling white foam. A waterwheel was set in it, working three pumps.

The Fiddler said, "I guess Slim is makin' out pretty good on this claim."

"Yes," said Anna. Of course Slim had told her, shyly but proudly, just how things were. "He's taken out nearly fourteen thousand dollars so far."

"Slim still got all his dust?" The Fiddler asked idly.

"Yes. He keeps it in a large cannister. There it is, over there."

Anna pointed at an old powder cannister, on the stream bank. The Fiddler got up, walked over to it and looked in, then came back. He said, "Coarse gold."

"Even coarse gold is good," said Anna.

"Yes." The Fiddler smiled. "A very good stake for a young married couple."

Anna flushed. She looked much prettier since arriving at Acorn Flats. "Let's go back," she said.

On the way back to Acorn Flats, the Fiddler said, "Where does Slim keep his gold?"

"While he's working, he keeps it right there on the bank of the stream. When he leaves, he brings it to his cabin. Missouri Bill sleeps in his cabin, too, so there's always someone there to watch the gold."

The Fiddler nodded. There was only one way to keep your gold safe, and that was to watch it yourself. Of course, the knowledge that anyone caught stealing it would dangle from a rope within an hour helped, too.

Anna and the Fiddler walked into Jake's place. Jake and Ned Sloan were at the bar, chatting.

Jake came over to them. He said, "Big night tomorrer night."

"Special shindig?" queried the Fiddler.

"Big dance," said Jake. "I sent word all around."

The Fiddler said, "Mebbe we'll be short of patches."

Jake laughed. "We c'n fix that easy. I'll get Missouri Bill to work puttin' patches on pants. He's a mighty good man with a needle."

Ned Sloan, twirling a whiskey glass on the bar, seemed to be paying no attention at all.

In a little while the Fiddler went out again, alone. First, he found a stout wooden box, and left it under a tree. Then he set off through the woods. He came presently to a creek. The creek bottom had been worked for gold and then abandoned. Old discarded tools were lying about.

He found an old bucket and a broken spade. He filled the bucket with sand. Straining a little under the load, he walked back toward Acorn Flats. As he approached the camp he changed his course though, and emerged from the woods behind Jake's saloon.

Through the brush he could see the lean-to at the rear of the saloon. This was Jake's living quarters; it was also where he kept his gold dust. Almost all the take in the saloon was in gold dust, and it had been a long time since any had been shipped.

Quietly, the Fiddler shoved the bucket of sand under a bush.

JAKE BOWLER'S saloon roared with hilarity on the big night. Miners rolled in from all the diggings around Acorn Flats. The pine boards shook under the weight of heavy-shod feet.

The dancing was to start at nine o'clock. From their corner, Anna and the Fiddler sat and watched. Slim's pal, Missouri Bill, was very busy at the entrance, roughly sewing patches onto the seats of pants, while the crowd shouted jokes at him.

Then Slim came in.

Anna was looking at Slim, but he did not look back at her. He shot a quick glance

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at the Fiddler, and the Fiddler gave him an answering look. Slim seemed a little strained, but he relaxed as he saw the Fiddler smile, and turned toward the bar.

Almost at once there were loud and angry voices at the bar. An air of tenseness settled over the crowd.

"Oh," exclaimed Anna, "Slim and Sloan are quarreling!"

"No one will be hurt," the Fiddler told her calmly.

He picked up his fiddle and started to play *Juanita.*

The door behind the bar opened and Jake Bowler came out, frowning. He looked around, saw the commotion and headed into it.

Quietly, the Fiddler put down his instrument, edged through the crowd and vanished into the darkness outside.

When the Fiddler appeared again, nearly half an hour later, the argument at the bar was still going on. But it was only an argument; no one had pulled a gun. Jake Bowler had seen to that.

The Fiddler took his place with Anna, picked up his fiddle and drew the bow across the strings. The argument ceased. Anna saw Slim shrug, mutter something to Sloan, and turn away.

Anna asked curiously, "Where did you go, Fiddler?"

"Partly, to watch the stage," said the Fiddler. "The stage always goes through at this time on Saturday night. I like to watch the stage, although I never ride on it." The Fiddler's eyes were vaguely bright. "I been here in Acorn Flats too long, Anna. I got to be leavin'."

"Leaving?" gasped Anna. "When?"

"Tonight," said the Fiddler, softly. "I stayed for you, one month. I leave tonight."

Anna caught her breath. "Tonight! But—"

"Fiddler!" Jake's voice came roaring across at them. "Strike up!"

It was time for the opening dance.

For a moment there was silence. Then the Fiddler drew his bow once across the strings and cried out, "Take your partners for a waltz!" The silence snapped. Shouts echoed against the walls. The Fiddler played *Sinful to Flirt.* Big bewhiskered miners grabbed each other.

Anna, with nothing to do until her turn came, waited, twisting her fingers. In a moment or two Slim pushed through the crowd and shly asked her to dance. She hesitated a moment, glanced at the Fiddler, then stepped into Slim's arms and whirled away.

The Fiddler's gaze was far away, but he had seen, and he smiled.

The night roared on with noise and furious good nature. There was dance after dance followed by drink after drink. Then the dancing would start up again. Once in a while Anna would do a dance and sing a song, and the boys would howl their approval. Some of them even threw her little nuggets of gold. Anna, for a little while, appeared to forget her own problems and gloried in the whole-hearted applause of the miners. She was no longer the plain girl from Sacramento; she was the queen of Acorn Flats, and she was beautiful.

Slim couldn't keep his eyes off her. The Fiddler didn't look at her much, but he watched her in that queer way he had of seeing without looking.

It was past midnight when the front door crashed open and Missouri Bill rushed in.

Bill was shouting as he came, "Slim! Slim! You been robbed!"

The dancing ceased abruptly. Slim turned and met Bill.

"Robbed?" he said, unbelievingly.

"Sure." Missouri Bill's whiskers were twitching in excitement. "I jest went back to the cabin, and while we've been gone someone's busted in there and took all your dust!"

Slim looked flattened. All his work of many months gone! All his hope of marriage with Anna!

"You—you sure, Bill?" he asked, limply.

"Dead sure, Slim."

Miners were crowding about them. A gold robbery! Maybe a hanging right away, if they could locate the thief!

A tall lanky man pushed through the crowd. By this time Jake Bowler was there, and just behind him, Ned Sloan.

But it was the tall lanky man who took charge. He said, "I'm Deputy Pilsing, from Grayton." He had a deep voice, and his eyes were calm. "I got word from Jake Bowler here about this shindig. Jake's idea was for me to come over in case the boys got a little rough, but it looks like there's somethin' more serious." He looked

over at Bill and Slim. "You boys tell me."

Slim told him about having his dust in his cabin, in the cannister. Usually, when Slim was in Jake's place, Bill would be in the cabin, but this evening was special, and Bill had been needed to make ladies out of gents.

"You got any idea who done it?" queried Deputy Pilsing.

Slim was uneasy. "I ain't got no idea," he said.

Ned Sloan spoke up suddenly, "You was over at Deacon Hill the time that feller Dykes had his gold dust stole, warn't you?"

"I was called there to see about it," Pilsing said.

"Then," said Sloan, "you remember the Fiddler?"

"I recollect he was there," conceded the deputy.

Sloan grinned. "Sure. And right after that the Fiddler was gone! Now, here he is in Acorn Flats—and some more dust is stole!"

Everyone was looking at the Fiddler now. But the Fiddler sat motionless in an old chair, his long legs crossed, his eyes brightly fixed in space.

Someone objected, "The Fiddler's been here, playin' his fiddle, right along!"

"I saw him go out before the shindig got started," retorted Sloan. "He was gone quite a while, too."

"That's right," put in someone else.

Deputy Pilsing regarded the Fiddler gravely. "You got something to say to that, Fiddler?"

The Fiddler reflected a moment. He didn't doubt that Sloan had been watching him and had seen him go out. He also knew that Sloan himself had gone out, and had been gone several minutes after the dancing started. But it wouldn't do any good to mention that, since he couldn't prove where Sloan had gone.

The Fiddler merely said: "That's right."

"What did you do?" asked the deputy.

"I watched the Sacramento stage," said the Fiddler.

"Did you do anything else?"

The Fiddler didn't answer.

Someone shouted, "Get the hemp!"

"No! No!" It was Anna. She pushed in and stood in front of the Fiddler. Realizing that the Fiddler was in quick danger of hanging, she turned pleadingly to Slim, "You know the Fiddler wouldn't steal your dust, don't you, Slim?"

Slim colored. He seemed completely baffled and uncertain. "Well, I dunno," he said. "I—I guess not." He looked queerly at the Fiddler. "I don't think he—"

"String him up!" someone yelled.

"Get the rope!"

"String him up!"

Deputy Pilsing's eyes fastened on the Fiddler dubiously. He said, "What did you do with the dust, Fiddler?"

The Fiddler said calmly, "I have no dust."

"Get a rope!"

"String him up!"

The deputy shrugged. "Fiddler," he said, "you know the reg'lar way of treatin' dust thieves. You ain't made no case for yourself. This mob will—"

"I'd like," the Fiddler said, serenely, "to talk to Jake Bowler and Ned Sloan—alone. I'm willin' to leave it to them."

The deputy said, "I'll give you five minutes. I can't hold the mob off longer than that."

JAKE BOWLER and Ned Sloan took the Fiddler back into Jake's private quarters.

"Better talk fast, Fiddler," Jake said.

Sloan chuckled. "It ain't goin' to do him no good, no how," he said. "So he wants to talk to us. That's good!"

The Fiddler walked over to a corner of the room. He pulled aside a folded blanket and revealed a stout keg.

"You keep your dust in here?" he asked Jake.

Jake scowled suspiciously. "Yeh, sure." The Fiddler stared down into the keg thoughtfully. He pushed his forefinger down into it and swirled the dust about.

Then he looked up at Jake. "You been puttin' dust in here quite a while now, I guess. Dust you took in over the bar. Dust from different diggin's. All different kinds of dust. Coarse, fine, and in between."

"Yeah," said Jake, thickly.

The Fiddlers brows lifted a little, and he said: "The queer thing is, Jake, the dust in here now is all the same kind!

Jake gulped. "What?"

"Just gold—coarse gold, the Fiddler said placidly. "No other kind. Coarse gold, just like Slim's!"

Jake and Sloan rushed at the keg, peered into it. Jake stuck his hand in and raked through it.

"Sand!" Jake spluttered, and swore violently. "Under the gold is sand! I had thirty thousand dollars in dust in this keg. He turned on the Fiddler and roared, "You did this!"

The Fiddler smiled faintly and gazed at the ceiling.

Sloan savagely yanked a gun out. "Fiddler," he said, "what did you do with the dust you took outer that there keg?"

The Fiddler lowered his head and looked at the gun. "You can't kill me in here," he said mildly. "That mob out there would string you up for killing an unarmed man!"

He smiled again. "You're a thief, not a miner," he told Sloan. "You came here to Acorn Flats to steal. Slim had more dust than anyone else, so you figgered to rob him. You got Jake here to work with you. And you aimed to make me the goat, which was all right with Jake because he knew I figgered on leaving here soon anyhow."

Sloan snarled. "That dust—where is it? If you don't tell—"

"Stow that, Sloan," cut in Jake, nervously. "We got to be careful. Them boys outside is hankerin' for a necktie party, and they could change their minds mighty quick about who was to get the necktie. And it ain't only my neck—it's my business. You're jest a floater, Sloan, but I got a good business here. So let the Fiddler talk."

"Thank you," said the Fiddler, politely. "There is very little to say. Slim was here at the shindig. For once, Missouri Bill was here at the same time. You saw to that. No one was watchin' Slim's gold. Sloan sneaked out and stole it. He brought it here and dumped it in your keg, figgerin' that there was a lot of dust already in there—all kinds—and no one could check up on it, being as it's impossible to check up on gold dust of different kinds all mixed up. Then you two could split the loot later. It was worth it to Sloan because that way he wouldn't risk his neck. But someone had already moved the gold dust that was in the keg, and put sand in, with mebbe a little sprinklin' of gold on top."

"You done that!" choked Sloan, in a rage.

The Fiddler raised an elbow. "No matter who," he said. "Anyways, if the deputy came in here with the boys, he could easy see this dust can't be Jake's, because it's all the same kind. And Slim could see it was just the kind of dust he had in his—"

"Blast all that," snapped Sloan. He still had his pistol jabbing at the Fiddler's chest. "I want to know what you done with the dust you took outer this keg! I'll kill you if you don't—"

"You're outer your head, Sloan," broke in Jake, angrily. "We got to figger this thing out quiet-like."

Sloan had been very busy at the bar all evening, and his eyes flamed madly. He waved his gun and shouted, "I want that dust or I'll—"

"No, you won't!"

Jake Bowler, with a mob outside his door and a madman in front of him, didn't waste time. He pulled his own pistol out now. Hastily, Sloan fired, afraid that Jake would be ahead of him. He missed. Jake looked surprised. He squeezed the trigger and his pistol leaped, the ball crashing into Sloan's chest.

THE door leading from the bar burst open and the mob flooded in, Deputy Pilsing in the lead. Ned Sloan was lying on the floor, bleeding his life out, and Jake was standing over him, a smoking pistol in his meaty hand.

"H'm," said the deputy. "So you killed Sloan, Jake!"

The Fiddler peered placidly over the heads of the crowd, as if his mind had already moved to distant camps. But Jake's eyes were wary, his mind alert. Jake had a job to do. Jake knew that it was all right for him to kill a man, if he had a good reason, but if his reason wasn't good enough he could prepare for a quick hanging himself.

Jake said quickly, "Yeah, I killed the mongrel!"

The deputy's eyes were steely. "Better make it good, Jake."

Jake talked fast, "It was like this, boys. The Fiddler told me and Sloan how he had seen Sloan go into Slim's cabin and come out with the gold. The Fiddler didn't see where Sloan took the dust, account he had to come back here. Well, Sloan went

crazy and pulled his gun on the Fiddler, and bein' as the Fiddler don't carry no firearms, I took it on myself to shoot Sloan. I think I done right."

The Fiddler turned his head and gazed pensively at Jake. Well, Jake was telling a little of the truth and some that wasn't so true. Jake was trying hard to save his neck, and not only his neck, but Slim's gold dust, as well.

Since Jake had lost his own dust, maybe thirty thousand dollars' worth, the Fiddler thought it might be fair enough to let him keep Slim's fourteen thousand dollars' worth.

So the Fiddler said, I guess that's about right."

There was a stir near the fringe of the crowd and the Fiddler caught a glimpse of Slim Paxton slipping away.

Quietly, the Fiddler walked through the mob. They made way for him. They even gave him a cheer or two. Beyond, in the saloon, he found Anna, distraught with worry. Her face lighted with relief as she saw the Fiddler.

"Oh," she said, "I was so afraid they had killed you!"

"It's all right," the Fiddler said. "They know that Sloan stole Slim's dust. And Sloan is dead."

"Will Slim get his dust back?" asked Anna, anxiously.

The Fiddler shook his head, no. Jake, he knew, had Slim's dust, and Jake would keep it.

The Fiddler picked up his fiddle. "Good-bye, Anna," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"Over the hills," said the Fiddler.

"But you are my—my friend," pleaded Anna. "I don't want you to go away. I—"

"Slim will need you," the Fiddler said gently. "He'll need you now more than ever!"

Anna's lips trembled and she said no more. The Fiddler strode out into the night. The rough road led down into a grassy path, through a leafy ravine, toward the south-bound trail. The Fiddler had gone only a short distance when a tall figure stepped out from behind a tree.

"All right, Fiddler," said a harsh voice. "I want my gold dust!"

The Fiddler stopped and stared into the white, drawn face of Slim Paxton. Slim he knew, was suffering because of the loss of his gold, suffering even more because he believed his friend had deceived him.

"I expected you to be waitin' for me," the Fiddler said. "But you'll never get your dust."

Slim was holding a pistol, and a lost gleam of moonlight played along its barrel.

Slim said shakily, "I trusted you, Fiddler. It was you who asked me to start that ruckus with Sloan, in the saloon. I didn't even ask you why you wanted it, but now I know. You wanted a chance to go out and rob me! I want my dust!"

"Anna needs you, Slim," the Fiddler said. "You must take her away from here. This life is only for fools and fiddlers."

"I have nothin' to give her," Slim said bitterly, "since you, my friend, robbed me!"

The Fiddler slid a slip of paper out of his boot top. He handed it to Slim. "This," he said, "is a receipt for a box of gold dust. Thirty thousand dollars' worth. I put it on the stage. You can claim it at Sacramento—you and Anna."

"I—I don't understand," faltered Slim.

The Fiddler said gently, "I figgered Sloan and Jake aimed to rob you tonight, and would put your dust in Jake's keg. So, early this evening, I took Jake's dust out of the keg and put sand in its place, with a little gold on top. If I hadn't done that there could be no proof that the gold they stole from you was not Jake's, but yours."

"But suppose you figgered wrong, Fiddler? Suppose they hadn't stole my dust?"

"Then I would jest have handed that receipt from the stage driver to Jake instead of to you."

Slim stared at the Fiddler in a long silence. Then he said, "I—I'm mighty sorry, Fiddler. I might a knowed you'd play fair with me." He thrust his pistol away, clumsily. "I'm awful obliged to you, Fiddler. But how about yourself?"

The Fiddler smiled. "Gold," he said, "would only weigh me down so I couldn't travel. Good-bye, Slim!"

Slim watched the Fiddler as he walked away, his fiddle swinging at his side, his head cocked high, as if he could see something beautiful beyond the treetops, even in the darkness of the night.

By GIFF CHESHIRE

BUILD YOUR

Rick sat his horse quietly as the Newgards led their string out of the burning barn.

Why did Rick Oakhurst, lone cowman, make his stand for a bunch of nesters who had branded him a range hog. . . . When all his cattleman's instincts cried out for him to take up the torch and gun that would restore to him the rich grazing empire that was his heritage?

CHAPTER ONE

The Rocking O Rides Alone

THE flames licked a bright spot in the night as Rick Oakhurst reined up at the top of a draw, swearing softly. That would be Nortell's place, a mile or so off to his right. The brooding that had filled his mind since he had left his own ranch and headed toward Painted Rock dissolved suddenly, and Rick turned his horse toward the fire.

FENCE WITH BULLETS!

A Roaring Range-War Novelette

He followed Nortell's lead-in lane. He had covered less than half the distance when he caught the swift drumming of horses' hoofs between himself and the fire. They were coming his way, leaving the burning buildings rather than pounding in to help out, as would be natural. He pulled up, the breeze of movement disappearing in a quick wash of hot night air, tinged with the scent of sage. Wanting a look at these riders, he held a place in the middle of the road, hand close to the butt of his Colt .45.

"Hold up!" he yelled as they approached, riding fast.

There were three of them, and for an instant they appeared on the verge of breaking past him, then they pulled down. A man spoke uneasily, and Rick recognized Ben Ney's heavy voice. "That you, Rick?"

"Yeah. What's going on at Nortell's?"

The trio relaxed visibly. A gangling individual with a broken nose discernible even in this pale moonlight, Ney was ramrod over at the big Star Dot. He chuckled harshly. "A fire. We was heading for town when we spied it. Nobody home over there, and Nortell's trashy damned buildings was too far gone to be saved when we got there. Between you and me—looks like good riddance.

"Yeah, mebbe." From the size of the blaze, it was evident there was little use in his riding on over there, anyhow. Rick swung his mount. "I was heading to town, myself."

He was aware that his company was not appreciated. Bad blood had lain between himself and Ben Ney ever since the little singer at the Silver Star saloon had come to town. For all his gorilla-like appearance, Ney wanted her, and he was a man to proclaim his intentions, however unlikely they might seem of natural fulfillment.

Now they rode without talk, wonder in Rick's mind. These men had come away from that fire swiftly, even if they had a cowman's natural satisfaction in abandoning the nester set-up to the flames. They were not above adding a little fuel or even touching it off themselves. Yet this last did not convince Rick. Nortell's nester island was one of two in the middle of Rick's Rocking O graze. Star Dot had a pair of its own, and it seemed likely that if this bunch had wanted to indulge in arson, it would have done it over there.

Rick racked his horse with the Star Dot riders' and turned with the trio into the Silver Star. There he left them. He saw that the delay on the road had nearly cost him the pleasure he sought. The cavern-like room was filled with tinny piano music, but to Rick the girl's voice was sunshine turned into sound. He moved up to the bar, knowing he was but one of many feeling this. No poker chip clicked, no throat was cleared, no chair scraped on the splintered floor. She was finishing her song, pouring her husky, stirring voice over this rough assemblage with an obvious indifference. It was as though she knew that what she had to give was too good for this company, including Rick Oakhurst.

She bowed and smiled in the surge of applause that followed, then turned and ducked through the nearby door. The only time she spent out front was when she sang. Staring at the space where she had been, Rick could still see her, every line—Tonia Melville, tall and slim, dark and beautiful, a lurking warmth deep in her black eyes that made a torment of her defensive aloofness.

A recklessness was in Rick tonight that had been building for days. Knowing that the movement would excite a varied interest, he turned down the length of the barroom and passed through the door that had closed behind her. Tall and supple and light moving, he paced on down a long hallway lighted by a single swinging lamp. He grinned with mild wickedness as he rapped on another door at the end.

For an instant after Tonia opened it, Rick let his mind refill with the heady image of her, a subtle fragrance from her lightly touching his nostrils.

"You know Maury doesn't allow you back here, Rick." Yet she made only a slight effort to bar his way when he stepped on inside.

"The devil with Maury! You're going to marry me, and you're going to get a proper courting."

"Oh, am I?"

There was a heavy tread beyond the door, then Maury Melville came in. A handsome, expensively attired man, he had his younger sister's deep-running aloofness. Now his eyes were dangerous. "Oakhurst, I've warned you about bothering Tonia."

Rick turned his hot gaze back to the girl. "Am I bothering you?"

Her smile took some of the sting from her words. "I asked you to leave, didn't I?"

Rick shrugged and turned and left without looking back. He rode home through the summer night, holding his big hat in his hand and letting the cool air press against his hot forehead.

Maury Melville, who appeared to be some ten years older than his sister, had been running the Silver Star saloon for several years, as well as the big Star Dot spread that joined Rick's Rocking O on the west. Tonia had arrived only a few months ago, having been reared and educated in the East. Melville let her sing as an attraction for his saloon, but otherwise he had built a wall around her, backing it with the gun bulge so obvious under his carefully

tailored coat. Sooner or later, Rick knew, he was going to challenge that gun.

It did not trouble him greatly that Melville's reputation was unsavory, that his own open intention of marrying into Melville's family had aroused criticism among the oldtimers in the basin that they troubled little to conceal. The moment he laid eyes on Tonia, Rick had known that he wanted her. Somehow he sensed that she was interested in him and would have treated him differently if it were not for her brother. This promise, behind the film of her aloofness, only served to keep a feeling churning in Rick that was like a chronic fever.

THE only other open contender for Tonia's affections was Ben Ney, who was Melville's foreman on the Star Dot. Ney was middle-aged, ugly and inherently vicious, and it did not make sense to Rick that Tonia would prefer the man or that Melville would want him for a brother-in-law. There was something running deeper than that, to which Rick could find no clue.

Rick rode out early the next morning, turning north toward the long line fence that separated his graze from the orchards on over in Hope Valley. Twice recently dawn had revealed a strip of cut barbed wire. The second time a small bunch of Rocking O steers had strayed through and down in the valley, rousing the ire of the orchardists. The fence was intact this morning. Rick had been about ready to set the tampering down to some mischief maker, yet since the night before he kept connecting it with the fire over at Nortell's.

He was on the point of riding back to the ranch-house and breakfast when he sighted a pair of riders down and across the fence, outlined against the green leafiness of the young apple trees. Rick waited, recognizing Frank Lang who owned the piece immediately beyond, and he saw that Polly Kelvin was with him. They seemed to be keeping an eye on the fence themselves. Rick rode down to meet them, annoyed at Lang's recent wariness.

Lang, a big man only a little older than Rick, was the leader of the fruit growers rapidly filling the fertile valley below the Rocking O with trees. Polly Kelvin, daughter of another orchardist, was a pretty girl with a spread of tiny freckles running across her upturned nose. Neither greeted Rick.

"Oakhurst, things're taking a shape I don't like," Lang announced bluntly.

Rick's eyes narrowed. He had long been aware of Lang's dislike, which had a specific cause. Before Tonia Melville came to Painted Rock, Rick had squired Polly Kelvin to various doings while, as everyone knew, Frank Lang was in love with her. The antagonism seemed only to increase after Rick had quit-claimed her. Like so many others, Lang felt that Rick had humiliated Polly, deserting her as he intended to desert all his old friends and neighbors to marry the sister of Maury Melville.

"What things and what shape?" Rick asked gruffly.

"You know what happened at Ott Nortell's, last night?"

"Burning out, you mean?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

Rick stared at him, surprised at the open implication. "Why, I seen it on my way to town, last night."

"It's a damned funny thing," Lang went on savagely. "Ott'd taken his family in to trade. He says there wasn't any fire left in the stove. Somebody set it."

"And you think I had a hand in it?"

A dogged, stubborn light shone in Lang's eyes. "Well, Nortell and Lem Newgard set out in the middle of your graze, mister. Twice your stock's strayed down onto my place, raising hell with the young trees. Mebbe it ain't your fault, but I don't think much of a man who'd trade his self-respect for a woman. Everybody knows the Star Dot's trying to spread out. Rocking O, too, mebbe. I can't speak for the stockmen, but I can tell you Hope Valley won't stand for that kind of stuff. Keep on, and you'll hit real trouble."

The pair wheeled their horses and thundered away, leaving Rick in a paralysis of rage and astonishment.

Rick's hard gaze followed them for a long while. He agreed with Lang that the thing had taken a sinister, ugly shape. There was no proof that Nortell's fire had not been accidental, but the two barbed wire cuttings had to be intentional. The ticklish nester-cowman set-up that his father had handled so well for so long seemed to be getting out of hand.

George Oakhurst, now two years dead, had talked to Rick about it once. "The land scramble came when you were too young to understand, son. When your ma and I settled here, this was all open range. A man could claim what he grazed same as if he had a tight fence around it, providing he was man enough to hold it. Then suddenly they threw it open to homesteading. That sure raised hell. Every cowpoke in these parts was squattin' on a half section, trying to hold his outfit's main graze together. It couldn't be done, and most of us got cut up pretty bad. I got two nester islands in the middle of my graze, like Star Dot done too, and I lost what the nesters call Hope Valley. A lot of the others made it mighty tough on the clod-hoppers, but I always respected their legal right."

The situation had changed but little in the intervening years, though ownerships had here and there. Maury Melville had bought the Star Dot, and Frank Lang had taken over his homesteading father on Rocking O's upper border. It infuriated Rick that Frank Lang had been so ready to accuse him after George Oakhurst's scrupulous treatment of the colony. The elder Oakhurst voluntarily fenced his north end, while the colonists themselves had been obliged to fence the other boundaries of Hope Valley, for custom dictated that it was a man's own obligation to fence in anything he wanted to protect in a country used mainly for grazing.

Yet Rick did not dismiss Ben Ney's half-suspicious presence at Nortell's fire, nor the fact that they were rivals in love. The Rocking O, he realized grimly, had reason to keep its eyes open just now.

The Rocking O was neither a large nor ambitious spread, and Rick Oakhurst had only two riders beside himself. The three of them batched it in the ranch-house George Oakhurst had built for his bride long ago.

OLD Cass Butterwick had breakfast ready when Rick got back there, and he and Pete Hawthorne were eating. Cass gave Rick a look that was half affection and half a scowl. Cass had come to this country with George Oakhurst.

"How'd you make out last night?"

Rick grinned sourly. "She still wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole."

Cass' wrinkled forehead knit deeper. "You're lucky. Mebbe she's making you miserable now, but you'd be a hell of a lot worse off if she married you."

Rick bridled instantly. "Listen, Cass—"

"Don't get proddy, kid. Mebbe she's a angel—if her folks was capable of breedin' one of each kind. She's already proved you can't separate her from her brother. If she's going t'be happy after you marry her, you'll have to get along with him. And to get along with Maury Melville'll mean playing along with him. You won't have a friend left in the basin, includin' me an' Pete." Cass mopped up his plate grimly. "You better let Ben Ney have her."

Rick grinned at him, nettled but not wanting to quarrel with the old man, who had always seemed like an uncle. The reference to Ben Ney set him to brooding again. In view of the underhanded work apparently going on, he figured the time had come to call for a showdown.

When he reached Painted Rock that evening, Rick went through the side door to the quarters the Melvilles used when they were not staying out at the Star Dot. He was determined to find out once and for all how Tonia felt about him. If it was as he hoped he would go on from there. If not, now was the time to know it for sure.

Tonia looked surprised when she opened the door, but not entirely displeased, he thought.

"Rick! You've got to stop this!"

He grinned and stepped lightly inside, again feeling that her objection was more an obligation than a wish. She looked up at him, puzzled and questioning, and he closed the door calmly. Abruptly he took her into his arms, moving with confidence, a sense of restored pride surging through him when she did not resist. Then she responded to his kiss, and he tasted the sweetness of her red lips. He had always read this promise. Now he had claimed it, and the way ahead was suddenly clear.

She stepped away from him, smiling in uncertainty, color staining her high-boned cheeks. "I should be very angry about that, Rick."

"You liked it."

"Well—I guess so."

He drew her to him again, his sense of place and time leaving him, and they were like this when the door from the saloon side

opened and Maury Melville walked in. From the start he had played the persistent watchdog.

The girl pulled away in quick fear, but Rick smiled calmly at Melville. "I'd have been out to see you about in a minute, anyhow, Melville."

Strangely, Maury Melville's pale, handsome face showed more bewilderment than anger now. His icy gaze swept from Rick to Tonia. "You'd better go out front and sing them a special number."

The girl's spine stiffened, and for an instant Rick thought she was going to show spunk, then she bit her lip and turned, disappearing through the door by which her brother had entered.

At last Melville said, "Well, Oahurst, that does it. It looks like she's in love with you, in spite of me."

"I sure hope so, fella."

Melville took a chair and motioned toward another wtih a pale, long-fingered hand. "Do you want to know why I couldn't have her fall for you, of all men? I meant to ruin you and maybe even get you killed in what's coming. Now, with her happiness involved, I don't dare."

Rick's voice was savage. "Well, it sure worked out nice for me, didn't it?"

The other smiled faintly. "There was nothing personal in it. I really have no objections to her marrying you, if she's sure she wants to. Maybe—maybe it'll work out best that way. Oakhurst, I haven't half the land I need to carry out my plans for Star Dot. You stand between me and Hope Valley, which I want. I meant to take both. Now we'll have to join forces and go after Hope Valley together."

Rick was studying him closely. "I suspected Ben Ney, but I didn't guess that you were behind it. Your idea was to set the nesters onto me."

"Exactly. And when you were conveniently out of the way, Star Dot was to come to your rescue, wiping out the nesters in retaliation. No one would ever have blamed Star Dot, and there would have been all kinds of land around to be picked up for a song. It was slick, Oakhurst, and this—this romantic development has ruined it. But together we probably could work out something even better. What say?"

"The hell with you!"

A cold fire burned in Melville's dark eyes. "You're not thinking, kid. Much as I hate to hurt my sister, there's nothing on earth you could do to stop me from carrying out my original plans. Don't be so damned righteous, Oakhurst. Your father lost Hope Valley to the nesters. Why not take it back, splitting it with me for sharing the job with you? In fact, I think I'm going to like this unexpected development. We could go far as—uh, members of the same family. I could show you how to be more prosperous than you are, fellow." He smiled with easy confidence. "That's all I had to say to you. The issue's clear. I'll want to know by tomorrow night if you're with me or against me!"

CHAPTER TWO

"Make Your Stand, Cowman!"

AS HE rode home, the realization grew in Rick that Maury Melville had him completely cased in. Without proof he could spread accusations throughout the basin, and Melville would only laugh. The nesters George Oakhurst had bent over backward to deal with so fairly were now stumbling blindly into the trap. What loyalty did he really owe them? Why not shut his eyes to Melville's cold-blooded ambition and throw in with him? It would mean Tonia, with no objections from Melville. It surely would mean more prosperity than the Rocking O had ever known. Rick was young and money still spelled much to him, a sick feeling haunted him with these thoughts, but he could not keep them entirely out of his mind.

The light showing in a Rocking O window as he approached puzzled Rick. The two oldsters were usually in bed long before this. Yet the place seemed normal enough when he clattered into the yard, and he stabled his horse leisurely. As he walked up to the house he saw the big, stooped figure of Cass Butterwick hurrying toward him. Then Butterwick's voice came through the night, tight with anger.

"We got some dead stuff. Pete and me found 'em down by the fence. Half a dozen head, and on Lang's side.

Shock laid its hold on Rick's skin. "Shot?" he asked incredulously.

"Deader'n hell. Through the head. It took a good shot, and Lang's a dead-eye."

Rick followed Cass into the house and went instinctively to the stove where a big blackened coffee pot simmered. He filled a cracked mug. "What's the matter? Fence cut?"

"Well—down again, anyhow. Pete and me rode it at sundown, like you told us to. We found the break, and the critters over in the orchard."

The shock in Rick was changing to icy anger. Frank Lang had threatened real trouble, if there was another stock straying incident. Now Rick understood that Melville's outfit was behind this, yet his resentment at Lang's quick proddiness kept rising. This was the way the nesters showed gratitude for George Oakhurst's years of careful consideration.

At dawn the next morning, Rick found the empty .30-30 shells and the tracks where a man had waited deep in the young apple orchard, as if spoiling for trouble. He must have found the fence open, and waited deliberately for something to mosey through. Rick spent some time there, then followed the tracks to Lang's house.

Lang was still in his undershirt, building a fire in the kitchen stove. He came to the door at Rick's fast, heavy tread on the porch, towered in the doorway with his deep-set eyes at once belligerent and defensive behind beetle brows.

"Save your breath, Oakhurst," he said heavily. "I beefed your Herefords. I've warned you time and again."

"Did you see that the fence was open?"

"Sure. You didn't expect them to jump over, did you? I'm not having any more damage to my young trees, mister. Now maybe you know I mean it."

Rick was holding himself in with difficulty. His glacial gaze swept Lang's brown, seamy face, dwelling on his stubborn, belligerent jaw. "I've told you before that somebody else's been cutting that fence. Trying to start trouble between us. You take a funny attitude when both your dad and you lived by the Rocking O for years without trouble."

"There's a different man running the Rocking O. Somebody playing fast and loose to get in good with a—"

"Careful! I wouldn't say it."

Lang shugged. "But you know what I mean, which proves my point. Don't come to me with your excuses, Oakhurst. Hope Valley stands behind me to the man. We don't like you, and we don't trust you. We've already had a taste of your dealings. From here on, you get as good as you send."

"If you mean Polly Kelvin, she'd be the first to say we were never any more than friends."

Lang's eyes were like chips of ice. "Naturally. That's all any woman could ever say. But I won't discuss her with you, Oakhurst. If somebody else's cutting your wires, get it stopped. Your dad sure wouldn't have stood for it more'n once."

Riding back to the Rocking O, Rick knew that he could no longer dodge the issues. The basin had long been uneasy about the signs Maury Melville was showing, all the indications of a hard and unscrupulous man designing on his neighbors. Because of Tonia, Rick had not wanted to listen to these things, to entertain them in his mind. This reluctance had been misread, not only by Dave Lang but by the others. According to their lights, Rick Oakhurst figured he had to do better than he had ever done to capture and hold the interest of a girl with Tonia Melville's background. Because of her, he had forgotten Polly Kelvin. Yet Tonia was in his blood, and as long as this was so he knew he would do anything to win her.

Yet his anger against those who had convicted him before the crime was a consuming thing. Whatever her brother might be, Tonia Melville was as fine and decent as Polly Kelvin. They were condemning her, too, without trial. He owed them nothing. Still, when Rick took his answer to Maury Melville that evening enough of George Oakhurst's blood ran in his veins that he said, "I'm willing to work with you on any decent proposition, Melville. But the rough stuff is out. If you call that being against you, that's the way it lays."

Melville regarded him coldly, tapping a pale finger on his desk in meditation. "I think you'll find yourself willing to go along with my plans, Rick. Come out to the bar and we'll have a drink. I can tell you Tonia will be happy to hear of any agreement we might reach."

Rick followed him out into the barroom, failing to see that any meeting of minds had occurred. The place was filling up; Tonia was about ready to sing her first number

for the evening. Then suddenly Melville was waving an arm, raising his voice.

"Belly up, men! It's on the house." He grinned then, watching in detached amusement the rush that usually followed an offer of free drinks. When he had the attention of the drinkers, he spoke again. "Men, I have a pleasant surprise. Rick Oakhurst and I have concluded a semi-partnership. Hereafter the Star Dot and Rocking O will be run together. It's going to be all in the family, in fact. Rick and my sister—well, drink up to the lucky cuss!"

THE thing was so unexpected that Rick found himself starting in amazement. Denial rushed to his lips, then he was staring. Tonia had come through the door from the rear rooms for her number. She had heard and stood there blushing but looking happy. His protest died on his lips.

There was a response, but Rick realized much of it was perfunctory. Star Dot men and saloon habitues cut loose with real cheering, but on old familiar faces Rick saw sudden glacial masks. Far down the bar, Ben Ney's face had frozen completely.

Awkward and embarrassed, Rick did the only thing he could by crossing to Tonia. She looked at him, eyes brimming, and whispered, "Oh, Rick!" and applause rocked through the room again. He said, "It looks like we have Maury's blessing, at least. Sing for them, then let's go back where I can kiss you proper."

"He had to give in," she whispered. "I told him I was going to marry you."

Yet a strange disturbance was in Rick all through the rest of that evening. Unobtrusively but definitely, Melville kept him from being alone with Tonia too long. Melville was bland, effable and outwardly pleased, yet the cold calculation still lurked in his deeply black eyes. While Rick had declared his intentions of courting the girl, it seemed strange that her brother should have announced an engagement publicly before one had been privately made, and as soon as he could do so without hurting Tonia, Rick meant to make a definite disavowal of any hook-up between the Rocking O and Star Dot. Yet his happiness at having at last won Tonia completely was a heady thing, and he postponed the righting of matters until the morrow.

It was nearly midnight when Rick rode home, the memory of Tonia's warm parting kiss lingering on his lips. She was willing to marry him immediately, and his deep submersion in the thought of this kept the significance of the sound originating off to his left from registering for an instant. Then he reined up, jerking his head in that direction. Gunfire. It was coming from over Lem Newgard's way. He dug in his spurs. Ott Nortell first, and now Newgard, who was the second nester squatting in the middle of Rocking O grass. Melville had not called off his war dogs, after all!

The shooting was sporadic, but the sound carried insistence with it. Then it ceased altogether, and the night grew still. As he pounded up he saw once more the sinister licking of yellow flames, rising from the barn. He heard the diminishing drum of horses' hoofs to his right. Night riders had hit again, this time bringing gun play. Rick Oakhurst had played the complete fool.

He could see figures high-lighted by the starting fire, recognized Newgard and his kid brother-in-law. They were making a desperate effort to get the animals out of the doomed structure. A warning rose in Rick against showing himself under these circumstances, but George Oakhurst's sense of decent neighborliness rose in him, and he rode into the lighted barnyard. It was evident at a glance that the barn was gone.

Lem Newgard was a young man, but work and worry had put a stoop in his gaunt frame, a quick testiness to his troubled mind. He turned toward Rick in a bitter greeting.

"Just happened to be riding by again, huh, Oakhurst?"

Anger boiled in Rick, but he checked it with his understanding that the man was taking a stiff punch to the solar plexis in this moment. The season's hay crop was going in that blaze.

"That's the way it was, Lem."

"I believe that—like hell! Frank Lang told me you just happened to see Ott Nortell's place go up, too. Thank God we were on the look-out for prowlers and cut loose or we'd've lost the whole shebang."

Rick turned his horse, knowing he could do no good here, that his further presence would only breed greater trouble. Cutting across country at a fast gallop, he reflected savagely that Newgard's suspicions would

have been all the deeper had he known what had taken place in the Silver Star that evening. Now, whether Rick Oakhurst liked it or not, he was implicated shamefully in this. He had not denied the working arrangement that Maury Melville had announced. Everything was there to convict Rick Oakhurst in the eyes of the basin and Hope Valley, the motive and machinery and the rapidly shaping method. And the decent cowman element was more than apt to take sides with the nesters in their own protection.

Rick was beginning to accept at last that he had been taken in. He understood clearly now Melville's quick and unorthodox announcement of his sister's plans to marry. This had tied Rick's hands, forcing him to side with Melville in the range war the man was building so surely and swiftly. And now an agony of suspicion was in Rick. Tonia's sudden yielding, her chance appearance there at the exact moment when he could have denied their engagement—it now seemed too pat not to have been carefully planned. In his blind preoccupations of his bewilderment, Rick Oakhurst had been taken in.

Yet even in that moment of suspicion and hot resentment, Rick knew that his love for Tonia Melville was deep and real, however much he might have idealized her. As he reached home and made his way to bed, he knew that this wild suspicion of cold cunning on the girl's part could not be cast out. A sense of disintegration and helplessness was in him, and he wondered if, as had happened to so many men before him, he was to remain putty in a woman's hands.

CHAPTER THREE

Sixes Broom the Basin

RICK rode the troublesome line fence himself the next morning, finding it intact and half hoping to see Frank Lang and start the sinister ball rolling. Yet it was not Lang but Polly Kelvin that he met at the northeast corner. She was mounted, dressed in levis and forking her horse with easy grace. He knew she had been watching his approach and waiting. The guilt in him took on a brittle edge of defiance as he cantered up to her.

"Howdy, Polly. Riding fence for Lang?"

The girl lifted annoyed eyes. "I came here on my own, hoping you'd be up this way. Rick, Max Grenfeld stopped by this morning. He was in town last night. He told dad you've tied up with Maury Melville."

"What of it?" he asked harshly

There was a stubborn thrust to her well-moulded jaw, and her tiny strip of freckles seemed to stand out more prominently. "Rick, I have the feeling you've let your emotions trap you. I'm frank because we used to be good friends, and please don't think I'm playing the part of a jealous, jilted woman. It's just that you can't buy happiness or win it as a jackpot. You've got to earn it, Rick, the hard way."

"You're like the rest of them!" Rick growled.

Polly shrugged. "Maybe the rest of them are right. I know you're sore because the country turned on you the minute you showed signs of tying up with the Melville family, Rick, but you can't blame it. A man can't play with evil without taking on its smell. George Oakhurst had proved himself here, but when you took over you were an unknown quantity. Recently you haven't been very reassuring."

"The girl I'm interested in is not evil, Polly." He was surprised that he said this with some reluctance. Was he certain of that? He wondered privately.

"I'm willing to grant that, but she is associated with it. This puts me in a bad spot, and I won't give you an argument by running her down, Rick. It's you I'm worried about. I don't believe what they're saying. If you're going to help Maury Melville in his obvious intention of starting a land squeeze, I think it's because you're forced to it. Melville's cunning as Satan. I don't understand it, but I think he's hog-tied you with more than his sister."

Rick's eyes widened in wonder. Of all his old associates, she was the only one to feel any confidence in him. It gave him a strange, baffled feeling, and he felt the tension running out of him. Here at least was a girl whose motives a man would never have cause to question. But if she did this out of love for him, things were only that much the worse. They had never got beyond friendship, and even in this moment the sharp, warm image of Tonia Melville filled his mind.

"Where did you expect to get with this, Polly?" he asked, his voice suddenly gentle.

"I don't know. Something made me want to talk to you about it, feeling's so high against you down in Hope Valley. They think you were behind or in cahoot on the attacks on the nesters out in your graze. They figure you'll come into the valley once you've cleared your own land. They're ready to hit back the moment Frank Lang gives the word, and I think he's about ready for that this morning, after what happened over at Lem Newgard's last night."

"That was a total surprise to me, Polly, though mebbe I should have forseen it."

Her eyes met his, and she smiled a little. "I felt that, Rick." She turned abruptly and rode swiftly away.

A strange feeling was in Rick as he reined his own horse around and urged it into motion. Maybe it was an accidental result, or maybe in her woman's wisdom Polly had known it would happen, but suddenly he felt some deep and dimly understood burden. Suddenly he saw quite clearly that she had spoken gospel when she had said that a man could not linger in the presence of evil without taking on at least some of its semblance. He knew now, that the deep loyalties he felt for the things built on decency in the valley had been behind the plaguing two-way pull in his heart from the day he had laid eyes on Tonia Melville. The love of her was still a wild beat in his blood, but now he rode straight for the Star Dot, his mind made up.

He met Ben Ney a mile short of the spreading ranch structures.

Ney's eyes were now unfriendly, bright with some inner excitement. "Howdy, Rick. Was riding over to see you. Boss says you and me are to make the detailed war plans."

"Is he over at the Star Dot?"

"Nope. Him and Tonia stayed in town last night."

"While you and your gunswifts hit Lem Newgard?"

"I came to talk about tonight, not last night, feller. Boss thinks the nesters might hit you. We got to set a trap for them."

"Tell your boss the Rocking O'll be on the side of the nesters if he keeps crowding trouble. And tell his pretty little sister the same."

Ney stared at him for a studious moment. "Well, what do you know? I sure will." There seemed to be something close to eagerness in the way he wheeled his horse around. The others followed suit and clattered off.

THE pounding of hoofs alerted him. He crossed the porch and was standing in the yard when the rider drew up. His eyes rounded in astonishment when he saw that it was Tonia Melville.

Wordlessly he helped her to alight. Her tight voice gushed from her. "Rick! I have dreadful things to tell you!"

There was a very real frenzy in her voice, and he helped her to the porch. "What happened?"

Even in the dim dusk there was a visible strain in her face. "I found out the truth about Maury. I'm sick, Rick—I just didn't know! He's always kept me off someplace, completely sheltered. He's practically kept me locked up since I've been out here. Now I know why. He was afraid I'd learn of his reputation in this country. But I've grown up now, in spite of him!"

"How did you find out?"

"From Ben Ney. He made a point of telling me the word you sent. He explained it all, because he thought he had you out of his way. He gloated that Maury'd told him to attack you with his horrid gunmen, tonight, either to change your mind or to see that you didn't make him any trouble. Rick, you must get away from here. They'll find out I'm gone and know I came to warn you!"

For an instant he thought it was already too late. Again the night filled with the beat of flying hoofs. Rick wheeled into the house, pulling the girl after him. He stepped onto the porch again alone, just as a pair of horsemen thundered into the yard. In mixed relief and surprise, he saw that it was Polly Kelvin, with Frank Lang.

Lang spoke without dismounting. "Oakhurst, my bunch is set to give you a lesson, tonight, but Polly made me ride over for a talk with you, first."

"Thank Heaven!" Rick breathed, blessing her privately. "Tonia Melville's in the house. Take her and get out of here fast. Looks like you might have to wait your turn, Lang. She brought word that the Star Dot's coming tonight."

"You broke with them?" Polly asked.

"You could call it that. I told them that if there was a war, I'd stand with my dad's old friends and neighbors. But take Tonia and get. If they find out she warned me they'll jump their schedule before I've had a chance to get ready for them."

Lang dismounted. "Take the Melville girl over to my place, Polly. I'll stay here with Rick."

It was too late. The Star Dot gunmen seemed to have left their horses and came in on foot, sneaking into position around the house. The initial fire came from all four sides. Rick was aware of this, even as he roughly shoved Polly on into the house.

With cool ease, Frank Lang dropped into a defensive position behind the porch bannister, his sixgun giving the Star Dot its first answer. Rick said, "I'll skin through to the back, Frank," and lunged through the dark house to the rear porch. He found partial shelter there behind a stack of split stovewood and opened up.

Ben Ney had at least half a dozen gunmen with him, Rick figured from the disposition of the attackers. There were two ahead of him, and the fire of one was visible on the side. There was probably an equal number on Lang's end of the house. This callousness put an icy rage in Rick, turning his gun into a calm but wicked instrument of defense. In the early exchange of fire he stopped the crimson flashing of one gun, and in a couple of minutes heard yet another man out there yell in pain.

Then the help Rick had hoped for came when Cass Butterwick and Pete Hawthorn joined him from the bunkhouse. And a moment later additional fire erupted out on the fringes of this deadly night battle. It took Rick a moment to understand that it was also being directed against the Star Dot rather than the besieged house.

That ended the fight. Bleeding from a nick in his right leg, Rick climbed to his feet, his ears still ringing. A voice yelled, "Hullo, there! We're coming over!" and the two old Rocking O riders came galloping across the moonlit yard. Others followed, and Rick stared in astonishment when he recognized a couple of Star Dot men.

Then a pair came lugging a third around the end of the granary. They carried him across the porch and into the kitchen. Rick lighted a lamp and, his chest soaked in blood, Maury Melville smiled at him weakly. "I guess I got mine, Rick. I made 'em tote me in, because I wanted to see Tonia a minute."

"What is it, Maury?" the girl asked, at Rick's elbow.

"This attack was all Ben Ney's responsibility. I killed him, myself. I'm not trying to whitewash my own record. I had my own schemes, but he double-crossed me when it came to Rick. I didn't suspect it until I told him I was going to take Rick in with me. Ney figured that with Rick dead, he'd have a chance with you, and he meant to see to it that Rick died. He brought his gunmen, but I got wise in time and brought the rest. That's—" There was a gasp and Melville spoke no more.

Tears glistened in Tonia Melville's eyes. "He wasn't all bad, Rick. Ambitious and ruthless, yes—but he did love me."

"I reckon he squared it," Rick admitted.

The others left, then, old Cass Butterwick helping it along by announcing he had a jug hidden over in the bunkhouse. Rick and Lang and the two girls were left alone with the dead man. Polly Kelvin smiled at Tonia, then at Rick.

"I had her dead wrong, Rick. She's everything you thought her. I congratulate you."

"Thanks, Polly. If she's willing to have me."

Tonia turned to him, a wan smile of disbelief on her face. "Oh, Rick!"

Polly's smile turned into her old tomboy grin. "Another thing, Rick. Please don't think you're breaking my heart. I can afford to admit I thought I was in love with you, now that I know I wasn't. When a real tight comes, a lot of things clear up. Let's go home, Frank. Now that the basin's been swept clean again, we might as well enjoy this moonlight."

Smiles broke out all over Frank Lang's weather-beaten face. He gulped and tried to speak, then gave it up and turned with Polly toward the door, pausing only long enough to shake Rick's hand.

Rick's eyes met Tonia's. "I'll take you back to the Star Dot. Don't reckon it'd be just right for us enjoy the moonlight rignt now. But there'll be other moons."

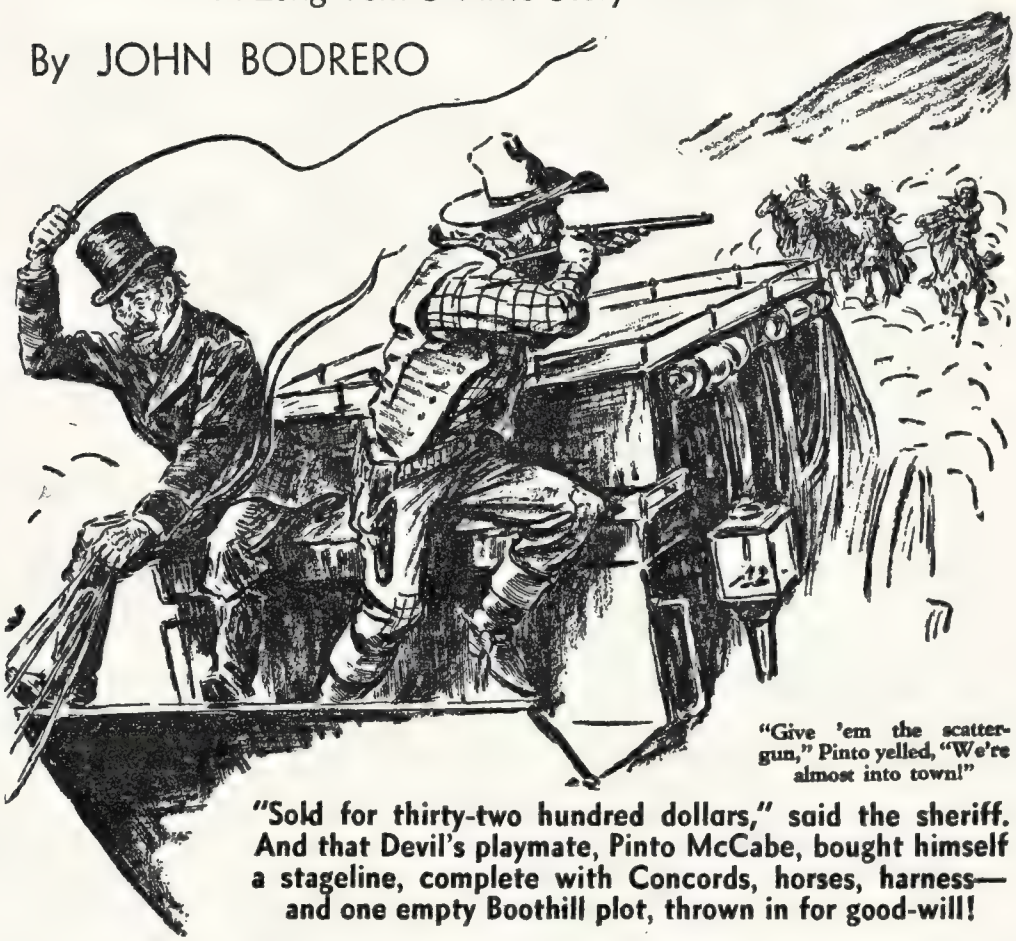
"Yes, Rick. Many other moons."

THE END

The Kidnaped Stage-Line

A Long Tom & Pinto Story

By JOHN BODRERO



"Give 'em the scattergun," Pinto yelled, "We're almost into town!"

"Sold for thirty-two hundred dollars," said the sheriff. And that Devil's playmate, Pinto McCabe, bought himself a stageline, complete with Concords, horses, harness—and one empty Boothill plot, thrown in for good-will!

THE two men coming into the town of Pewter Creek rode as if they had made a long trip. And from the way their horses drooped, tails down, and withers shaky, it was evident they had traveled fast.

Long Tom Gallatin slumped in the saddle, boot heels thumping the ribs of his spent horse at every plodding step. He was powdered with trail dust from the sagging brim of his high-crowned hat to the scuffed toes of his boots. He peered curiously up one side of the street and down the other with a sort of timid distrust, like an old ram hesitating at the gate of a strange corral. He shifted his quid to his cheek.

"The seat of my pants has wore this saddle clean down to the wood," he said wearily. "What say we get down and light here awhile. They got a bank, a hardware store with a wooden horse in the window, and a saloon with a two-story front." He leaned over and spat carefully through the ropy mustaches that framed his mouth. "The range looks good back up in the hills. Might be some open land up there." He glanced sideways at his partner.

Pinto McCabe sat in his saddle stiff as a poker. A little ramrod of a man, he wore a stove-pipe hat perched jauntily on the side of his head. A short iron-gray beard bristled on his chin. As though he was obli-

vious of the heat of the noonday sun, he wore his long skirted frock coat buttoned tightly over a neat scarf.

Long Tom waited hopefully for an answer. Then he spoke again. "I said why don't we take up a piece of land around here?" He nodded toward the grass-rich valleys fanning up into the timbered range of mountains beyond the town. A faraway look came into his faded eyes. "Right next to some happy-go-lucky cattle king who don't know how many cows he's got . . . ."

He was suddenly aware of Pinto's reproving glare, and swallowed uncomfortably. The horses picked up, heading toward the watering trough outside the saloon.

"What does it take to teach you?" Pinto McCabe asked pointedly. "A rope burn on your neck?"

Long Tom fingered his Adam's apple as he listened to his horse sucking water in noisy gulps. In that last town, a week's hard riding back, he reflected sourly, it had been Pinto who started the trouble that nearly ended in a hanging. And now the little coot was getting righteous as a schoolmarm. As though it wasn't hard enough to make an honest living. Why, a man could hardly light a branding fire at night without having some nosey citizen sneak up with a Winchester.

He reined over to the saloon and dismounted wearily. His mumbling stopped abruptly as he saw, directly in his path, a small wooly dog curled up at the edge of the wooden sidewalk. With one eye open, it regarded him coldly. As long Tom lifted a foot to step over it, the little dog raised a lip to disclose a row of white teeth and snarled. Long Tom jerked back his foot.

"Danged unfriendly town," he muttered and backed around his horse. Together, he and Pinto walked into the half-darkness of the saloon.

Bellied up to the bar, they were listening to the barkeep, who rattled on as he wiped the glasses. "Yessir, fine little town, Pewter Creek," he was saying. "A good one-saloon town, I call it. Only reason the bar ain't two deep with customers right now is, everybody's down at the sheriff's sale."

"Sheriff?" said Pinto, setting down his glass.

"Yep. Sheriff's down at the livery stable. Auctioning off the stage line. What's left of it. Old Jeff Doan used to run it, till he passed quietly away last week. Sorry to see Old Jeff go." He leaned forward confidentially. "Why, in good times, he'd clean up as high as a thousand dollars a month, what with mail, express and the gold mine contract."

"Is that right?" Pinto polished his fingernails absently on his lapel. "A thousand dollars a month! Wonder someone didn't start a rival line."

"Couldn't. He had an exclusive franchise to carry the mail and express. Got a year or more to run, yet. As long as he made a weekly run to Dos Rios."

Pinto shrugged. "That sounds easy enough."

The barkeep nodded. "Yes, but Old Jeff was getting along in years. He had bad luck. Stage over the cliff, fire in the stables, horses wandered off. Finally driven to the wall and the bank closed down on him. That's why the bank's selling so sudden. So the new owner can keep up the weekly run and hold on to the mail and express franchise."

Pinto finished his drink. "Reckon quite a few people down there will be bidding for that stage line."

"Nope." The barkeep swatted a fly with his towel. "Nobody wants to buy a stage line. It'll probably go dirt cheap—yessir, dirt cheap."

Pinto rang a couple of coins on the bar, tugged Long Tom's sleeve and walked out of the bar. Blinking in the bright sun, Long Tom stepped blindly off the sidewalk. The air was suddenly full of dog yells. Long Tom rose to the saddle in a flying mount, shaking the woolly dog loose from his trouser leg. "Oughta tie that dog up," he yelled sourly. "He fanked me clean up to the knee."

The bartender laughed, standing before his swinging doors. "Solid looking piece of horseflesh you're riding," he called. "What's your price?"

Long Tom brightened. "Well, now, you wouldn't want this crow-bait. But it might be I could turn you up a good horse in a day or two—"

Pinto kicked his toe into the ribs of Long Tom's horse. "Get going," he said grimly, and led the way up the street. "For the last time, no more horse stealing. Now ride along. If we ain't too late, we're buying us a stage line."

With thirty-two dollars?" Long Tom's voice rose incredulously. "That's all we got left, ain't it?"

"He said dirt cheap, didn't he?" Pinto settled the stovepipe hat carefully on his head. "Yessir, what we've always dreamed of. A business of our own. Honest, law-abiding citizens." He slapped the spurs to his horse and the two partners galloped up the street.

THE crowd in the big corral behind the livery stable was quiet. Too quiet, Long Tom reflected. His long nose twitched suspiciously as though testing the breeze for trouble. He trailed along after Pinto, his pale eyes glancing over at the men sitting, heels hooked up, on the top log-rail. There was a tight little group surrounding a big red-faced man who sat on a bale of hay in the sun. All strangers. Not a man he recognized. He sighed heartily as he saw the sheriff standing in the bed of a spring wagon in the center of the corral. Fine little town, this.

The sheriff raised his hand. "Breaks my heart to see this outfit go begging for a bid," Long Tom heard him say. "One Concord in fine repair, standing there for your inspection. Twelve fast Morgan horses, all under seven years. This here livery stable, the corrals, and gents, this is the real attraction: the government franchise—mail and express—a regular gold mine. And all you got to do to keep the franchise, is run one weekly stage to Dos Rios." He lifted his hat and mopped his head wearily. "But when I ask you gents to fork over a little hard cash, everybody sits like he's got his tongue tied back in his head. Now, I suggested an opening bid . . . ."

Pinto and Long Tom drifted over to the stage with its harness draped invitingly on the fence alongside.

"First class outfit," said Pinto.

Long Tom ran his hand over the hickory frame and reached underneath to feel the rawhide springs. "Like new."

"Horses are sound, too," Pinto said.

"Yeah." Long Tom's hand fondled the whip in its socket on the splashboard. "Reckon we could hire us a boy to clean out the stables, and I could drive—"

"You drive a team?" Pinto snorted. "You'll handle that pitchfork!"

The sheriff's voice boomed out over the corral. "Now, I'll try again, gents. Who'll give me the starting bid?"

Pinto turned to a man who leaned against the fence beside him. "Friend, what's the bid the sheriff suggested?"

The man took a straw from his teeth for long enough to open his mouth and say, "Fifteen."

Pinto grabbed long Tom's arm. "Hear that? I told you it was going to be a steal. Why, any of the horses is worth twenty dollars." He cleared his throat and raised his hand for attention. "Thirty-two!" he shouted.

"That's all the money we got," Long Tom whispered frantically.

Pinto drew himself up in an attempt to look downwards at Long Tom. "What's a few dollars? Did you want me to say fifteen and have people think we were just a couple of pikers?"

The sheriff was noticing them for the first time. "There's a man who knows a bargain. I hear thirty-two. Will someone give me thirty-three?" He looked questioningly around the crowd.

A hard-looking man started to break away from the group around the red-faced man. The red-faced man put a hand on his sleeve and stopped him. He whispered for a moment with the group around him. Then he shook his head and stalked away.

"Thirty-two," yelled the sheriff. "Do I hear another bid? Going once—twice—three times. Sold! To the little gent in the top hat. For thirty-two hundred dollars!"

Long Tom's jaw dropped. He shook his head as if to clear it. Surely, he hadn't heard right. He grinned and nudged Pinto.

He said "thirty-two *hundred* dollars."

Pinto didn't move. "That's what he did say."

Long Tom turned, took one running step toward the gate, stepped into a water bucket, and fell thrashing in the dust.

Then Pinto had him by the arm. "Get up, you whiskered old goat."

The sheriff was approaching. "Glad you boys dropped in, or I'd have had to let it go for nothing." He held out a paper. "Sign on the dotted line, fork over the cash, and she's all yours."

Using the crown of his top hat for a rest, Pinto signed his name and handed the paper to Long Tom to sign.

"The money?" the sheriff suggested.

Pinto smiled expansively. "Just going down to the bank for it—"

"Wait a minute, now. This here's a cash sale, money on the barrel-head. I ain't running no credit business."

Pinto McCabe placed his top hat carefully on his head. "Suh, you are insulting a member of our great state legislature."

The sheriff looked confused, glanced down at the paper Pinto had just signed. Comprehension showed in his eyes. "Oh," he said. "Senator! That's quite all right, Senator McCabe. I didn't quite know you. You must be from one of our northern districts."

"The most northern," said Pinto. He turned and prodded Long Tom. "Come on, my man. Let's not stand here gawping."

Outside, Long Tom swung into the saddle. "You and that bull-fiddle mouth," he grunted. "Let's haze outa here before that sheriff—"

Pinto looked up incredulously. "You mean leave town? Right after we've just set up in business? No, sir. We're heading for the bank."

Long Tom's jaw waggled. "The bank?" he said hoarsely. Looky here, Pinto McCabe, you've shoved me into tall trouble in my days, but danged if I'm going to walk into a bank in broad daylight." He would have swung away, but Pinto reached and grabbed the reins.

"Not to rob it, you simple cow thief. We're going down there to borrow some money."

LONG TOM sat stiffly in the back office of the bank, turning his hat in his hands. The sweat ran coldly in a little stream between his shoulder blades, as he listened to Pinto McCabe.

"A man tires of public life," Pinto was saying to the banker. "He longs to get back to the open range. To be among real people. To build things up, like this run-down stage line."

Long Tom felt his throat constricting. There was a familiar ring to those words. He'd heard Pinto wagging his chin whiskers before. And trouble was never long coming. As certain as a storm followed the currents of hot air rolling across the prairie. Why couldn't the little hombre keep his mouth shut? Or at least fade out of town before people found out they were as broke as a four-card flush. It was a wonder that banker on the other side of the table hadn't caught on already.

When they had first come in, Long Tom had marked the banker down for one of those hard-headed business men. The banker had held out his hand and said, "It's a pleasure, Senator. I'll be one of your best customers. Own the gold mines up the valley. I ship bullion on the stage most every trip."

And instead of questioning him, the banker was practically forcing Pinto to take the money. Long Tom's eyes bugged as the banker counted out the money, handed it over, and got Pinto's signature.

"Well, Senator, the deal's closed," the banker said, and folded his hands over his vest. "I'm glad to see you get that line. I need a way to carry out my gold. With your political influence, you should be able to keep it going."

"How's that?" Pinto stopped in the act of lighting a cigar.

"Well, you see, Senator, it looks like somebody else wants that line. Ever since old Jeff Doan was murdered—"

"Murdered?" Pinto sat up stiffly. "I thought—I heard tell he just passed away quietly."

"Not exactly." The banker shook his head. "Last week Jeff Doan took his other stage into Dos Rios. Along the road, it got dynamited off a cliff. They found old Jeff down there under the wreckage. We think —" he raised a hand, "but we can't prove it, mind you—we think it was Sam Cass. You probably saw him at the sale to-day. Big, red-faced man. Goes around with a bunch of men that look like gun fighters. He drifted in from up north with his gang a couple of months ago. That's when the trouble in the stage line started."

Long Tom's jaw fell open. This was how they'd gotten the money so easy. This banker needed a couple of likely hombres to fight Sam Cass. That's why nobody else would bid. Scared out by a gang of gunmen. He began to understand what the barkeep had meant. The stage run off the cliff, fire in the stables, the horses driven off. And he and Pinto had walked into it like a couple of kids tearing open a hornet's nest. Dazedly, he watched Pinto rising, smiling as if he had been listening to a joke.

"Don't worry," Pinto was saying.

"That's what I've got that long-legged partner for. Fastest gun-toter this side of the Mississippi."

LONG TOM was silent until they got out on the street. Then he broke out fiercely. "So help me, Pinto, you can count me out. This time you're on your own."

Pinto stopped and turned slowly, his mouth working as if in astonishment. His eyebrows rose as he took the cigar slowly from his mouth. "You mean, you want to get out of doing any work, and still share the profits of this venture?"

Long Tom snorted. "Only profits you'll get is a free burial. Me, I'm pulling out. When it gets dark—"

Pinto McCabe shook his head sadly. "Rank ingratitude," he said. "Cut in for everything, fifty-fifty, and you back out on me." He shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

Back in the livery stable, Long Tom watched morosely as Pinto paid over the money to the sheriff. Then he turned away, looking for oats for his horse. He'd saddle up, he decided sourly, and come dark, he'd make tracks out of this town. He was shaking out his saddle blanket when the sheriff rode off and Pinto walked up, rubbing his hands together.

"Well, that's over," Pinto said. "I got a legal bill of sale in my pocket."

Long Tom folded the blanket and smoothed it out on the horse's back. "I hope you got it wadded thick enough to stop bullets."

"Don't be so jumpy. There isn't going to be any shooting."

Long Tom poked a finger at Pinto, and his Adam's apple bobbled like a turkey gobbler's. "You wait. Sam Cass will burn you out like a coon in a holler tree."

Pinto was silent for a moment, puffing on his cigar. "Suppose I told you I've figgered a way to make a mint of money—without so much as taking a chance?"

"I wouldn't believe you."

Pinto looked hurt. "Now listen. I've had a plan right along. We're not sticking around here to look down a gun-barrel. We're driving this stake to Mexico. Tonight."

"To Mexico! That's five hundred miles." He straightened up. "What—"

Pinto waved away his objection. "I know a man down there who'll pay us two thousand dollars for that stage and the team."

Long Tom's chin waggled uncertainly. "You mean steal the stage? That's dishonest . . . . . ."

"It's ours, isn't it? I got the bill of sale right here."

"Yeah, but we owe that banker—"

"That banker only loaned us the money because he figgered we'd get shot trying to run the stage. We were just live bait in a trap to get Sam Cass hung."

Long Tom shrugged. "Guess we could look at it that way."

Pinto picked up a pitch-fork and handed it to Long Tom. "We got to act fast. You get up in the loft and pitch some hay down here. This team has to be fed."

Long Tom climbed the ladder to the hay loft that formed the upper floor of the stable. He carried a forkful to the opening in the center of the loft, and dropped it through. Below, he could see Pinto. "Hey, Pinto," he called. Pinto rocked his head back and squinted upwards. Long Tom leaned out precariously over the opening. "Suppose somebody sees us pulling out of town?"

"We're going late tonight. It'll be dark."

Long Tom dropped a few more loads through the opening. The pile below looked big enough, he decided. He wiped his face on his sleeve. Then he was suddenly quiet.

Riders were coming into the door of the stable. He peered down. The hard-looking man he had seen earlier at the sale rode in, followed by Sam Cass. Long Tom stepped back from the opening, slipped on the slick hay, and sat down heavily. The fork started to slide through. He snatched it back, and breathed shudderingly as he thought of what would have followed if that fork had dropped, tines first, between those two riders.

As Long Tom looked back, the hard-looking rider slid from his horse beside Pinto and rammed a gun into his side. Long Tom watched Pinto stiffen, glare at Sam Cass, and take the cigar from his mouth.

"Tell your man, suh," said Pinto evenly, "to take his gun out of the back of a member of the legislature of our great—"

"Shut up, you tinhorn," said Sam Cass. "I had a good laugh when I heard tell you were a senator from up north. That's my stamping ground. I just come from there." He looked around. "Where's that sheep-faced partner of yours?"

Long Tom held his breath and closed his eyes. In a minute they'd look up.

"He's drifted," said Pinto. "Scared out."

Sam Cass laughed. "He's smarter than you. Now listen carefully. I want this stage line, franchise and all. Just to make sure there's no slip, I'll ride along with you to Dos Rios in the morning. With my boys." He stepped off and hooked the near stirrup over the horn. He talked over his shoulder as he unknotted the latigo. "I'll send men down in the morning to harness the team." He slid saddle and blanket off the horse and led the horse into a vacant stall. He turned to the gunman. "You keep an eye on him. I'll be at the hotel up the street."

The gunman nodded. "Suppose that long-legged galoot shows up?"

"Show him the open end of your gun. He'll probably drop dead with fright."

FROM the loft, Long Tom watched Sam Cass' big body disappear through the doorway. Then he looked back at the gunman standing below and gulped uncomfortably. Now he was trapped up here. That was what came of listening to the little coot's talk, he reflected angrily. He turned his head, wondering if he could get back to a window and drop down to the ground unnoticed. If he hadn't listened to Pinto, he'd be out of town right now, jogging along under the stars, not a care in the world. Below he could hear Pinto talking to the gunman.

"I don't get it," Pinto was saying. "If he wanted the stage line so bad, why didn't he buy it in at the sale?"

Long Tom gathered himself to stand up. There was a window back there. If he could make it out of the livery stable, there'd be horses for the taking at every hitchrack in town. He heard the gunman's voice below.

"Sam wouldn't pay out good money to a bank for a stage line he could get for next to nothing."

The gunman sat down on the pile of hay below the opening and Long Tom could see the gun hanging from his hand. A fit of trembling shook his half-straightened knees. Now he'd just turn slowly and sneak for the window. In five minutes he'd be clear of this town.

"As long as I own the stage line—" he heard Pinto begin.

The gunman yawned. "You'll have an accident tomorrow and break your neck. The bank will auction the line again, and Sam will buy it for a few cents on the dollar."

A spear of grain slipped from under Long Tom's foot, and spiralled down through the opening, landing on the brim of the gunman's hat. Long Tom held his breath, his eyes bugging out as the gunman took off his hat, looked curiously at the straw, and leaned back to look upward.

For a moment their eyes met.

Long Tom twisted suddenly away. He felt his feet slip in the slick straw. An agonized yell burst from his throat as he shot feet first through the opening. He lit thrashing, feeling a body crumple under the driving impact of his bootheels. He rolled away, and opened his eyes hopefully. The gunman was lying motionless and Pinto had his gun.

"You sure took your time," Pinto said. "I was beginning to think you'd run out on me. We got to get moving. I'll hog-tie him. You take our two horses, and that roan of Sam Cass'. Lead them out the alley to the edge of town, and haze 'em into the brush. I don't want any fast horses left behind if Sam Cass takes a notion to run us down."

Long Tom led out the animals. "Sure hate to lose this horse of mine—"

"Forget it!" snapped Pinto. "First dark night you can go out with a pail of oats and find another the same way you did that one. Now get going. I'll put the harness on the team."

Long Tom lead the horses out into the alley behind the buildings that fronted the main street. He shook his head as he listened to the muffled tramping of their hoofs. Sure was a shame to turn good horseflesh loose. A smell of stale beer and sawdust drifted to his nose. He looked up, and realized he was passing the saloon. Might as well get himself a drink, he thought. It looked like a thirsty ride ahead. Yep, he decided, as he tied the horses to a stake fence, he'd have a drink first, and then turn the horses loose.

Pinto had the team in harness by the time Long Tom returned.

"You sure took long enough," Pinto said.

Long Tom picked up the lines and backed the team against the stage while Pinto linked up. They got up on the box.

"What road do we take?" Long Tom asked.

"Dos Rios first, then south. Here, I found this in the stage." Pinto crammed a double-barrelled sawed-off shotgun into Long Tom's hands. "We gotta turn out into the main street now. I'm going slow and quiet, but don't you fall off." The stage rolled forward.

There was still a light or two in the windows on the main street. Long Tom looked up. Stars shone overhead. He listened to the wheels of the stake crunch on the rocky street. The thoroughbraces squealed as the team danced under the restraint of the lines in Pinto's hands. Long Tom crossed his legs and leaned back. Then the leaders shied away from a still form curled in the middle of the street. The stage veered sideways, and Long Tom lurched and dove headlong into the street. From under his body came the high-pitched yelling of the woolly dog. Long Tom swarmed up the wheel, grabbing for the iron hand hold.

Pinto leaned over and fastened his fingers in Long Tom's collar. "Goddelmighty, can't you leave that dog alone? You'll have the whole town—"

Twin roars burst from the muzzles of the shotgun in Long Tom's hand. He let out a piercing yell, punctuated by the crashing of glass from the window of the bank across the street. The team broke away as he clawed himself into the seat. Pinto fought them down to a surging run up the main street. He made the curve at the edge of town, the rear hub tearing through a picket fence like the rattle of musketry.

Long Tom looked back. Windows were slamming open. He heard shouts, a bull voice roaring, "They're taking the stage! Get my horse!" Only one man could bellow like that.

"Sam Cass won't like this," Long Tom said plaintively.

THEY must be halfway to Dos Rios, Long Tom was thinking. He braced wearily against the surges of the reeling stage, wondering how soon the pursuit would catch up with them. Somewhere behind, maybe five miles, maybe nearer, Sam Cass and his riders would be following, the hoofs of their racing horses rolling thunder from the rutted trail.

The team was lathered and Pinto pulled them to a walk to climb a short grade. He wiped his face on his sleeve. "You sure fixed things up," he said disgustedly. "But at least Sam Cass won't have that fast horse of his. With the start we've got—" A doubt seemed to rise in his mind and he turned abruptly. "Say, you did turn his horse loose in the brush, didn't you?"

Long Tom fidgeted uncertainly.

Pinto glared. "Well, did you?"

Long Tom cleared his throat with an effort. "Not exactly. I figgered a horse like that was too valuable to just lose—"

"Get to the point!" Pinto yelled. "What did you do with that horse."

"I sold it." Long Tom fished in his pocket and brought out a handful of bills. "For three hundred dollars."

"Who to?" Pinto's eyebrows rose incredulously. "Everybody in Pewter Creek would know that roan with the white blaze belonged to Sam Cass."

Long Tom shrugged helplessly. "I rubbed red dobe mud on that white face of his. Then I sold him to the barkeep at the saloon. It was dark in the alley . . . ."

Sam Cass

Pinto cut at the team with his whip. The stage forged ahead. "That's just Jimdandy. Sam Cass will swing us both off the same rope."

It was dawn, and they were five miles out of Dos Rios. Pinto yelled exultantly, pointing out with his whip the windmills on the horizon, the reflections from the roofs of the houses.

Long Tom looked behind, and in the glare of the rising sun, he saw what he had been

dreading to see. A mile or so behind, riding the roan horse, came Sam Cass. There were three riders with him, and he thought he could see the arm of one rise and fall as if quirting his mount.

For two miles the team held to a dead run. Then the pace began to tell on the leaders. There was slack in their traces and the stage slowed. Long Tom looked back. Sam Cass and his riders were closing the gap fast. Another minute and they'd be within shooting distance. A mile passed and Sam Cass pulled a carbine from its boot under his leg. He stood up in the stirrups and raised the gun. Long Tom ducked as the slug droned overhead.

"Give 'em the scattergun," Pinto yelled. "We're almost into town."

Long Tom swiveled around. Over the twin barrels of the shotgun, he saw the riders running in a bunch a hundred yards behind. He closed his eyes and pulled both triggers. The recoil slammed him back. He grunted and opened his eyes. Dust eddied from the roadway where the slugs had caromed. The riders came on fast.

He heard the roar of the flying stage echo back from buildings. He saw men erupting from houses as the stage tore down the main street.

Pinto stood up, balancing with the lines. His voice rose in a hoarse yell that carried to the men standing in the street. "Stage robbers!" he yelled, gesturing with his whip at the riders following. "Take cover and start shooting."

From the corner of his eye, Long Tom saw a group of men with rifles, headed by the sheriff, scatter to vantage points and begin shooting. He looked back in time to see one of Cass' riders fall from his galloping mount.

Pinto veered the stage around a man running across the street. Long Tom hung on as the stage skidded into the sidewalk. He felt the bump as the wheel buckled, heard spokes splintering. The stage lurched drunkenly on its side and ground to a stop. Long Tom jumped clear.

Ahead, outlaw bullets kicked the dust around Pinto's feet as the little hombre sprinted for a bunch of saddled horses rearing at the hitchrack. Long Tom legged after him, sprang on the nearest horse, and spurred away. The roar of gunfire increased as they raced out the other end of town. A few hundred yards into the brush, they pulled up. Then the gunfire died abruptly away.

"Reckon Sam Cass has cashed his chips." Long Tom said and pointed into town. The roan horse was standing riderless in the street. "We sure lead them outlaws right to the sheriff."

Pinto's eyes rolled virtuously upward. "We only did our duty as honest citizens. Well, we can ride back now. They're probably getting together a committee to honor us." He straightened the scarf at his throat and flicked dust off the lapel of his frock coat. "They just won't be able to do too much for us. We'll keep that stage line. Expand all over the state. Why, in a few years, we'll own—" He looked curiously at Long Tom. "What's that you got in your hand?"

Long Tom held up a vest. "Found it in the saddlebags of this horse. Got a badge pinned on it. Says 'Sheriff.' Look."

"I might have known it!" Pinto said. "Twenty horses in the street, and you have to pick the sheriff's horse. Some men get mighty touchy—"

"That ain't all." Long Tom was smoothing out a paper he had taken from the pocket. "Here's pictures of us."

Pinto leaned over. His eyes bugged out as he read the words. "Warrants are held . . . Pinto McCabe and Long Tom Gallatin . . . . Confidence men . . . ." He reared back in the saddle, his lips moving soundlessly. Slowly his head swiveled around and he looked toward the town. An inarticulate cry burst from the little man's throat as he stabbed a pointing finger down the hill.

Long Tom turned vacantly to look. From the town a group of horsemen swept around the bend and hammered toward them. Dazedly he recognized the sheriff in the lead. Sixes barked in the still air and bullets slashed into the brush around him. For one unbelieving moment Long Tom stared. Then he whirled and rammed iron to his horse. Ahead, he saw Pinto McCabe, weaving through the brush at a full run, batting his horse with the stove-pipe hat at every jump.

Long Tom followed. For a few rods he urged his horse with piercing yells. Then he felt the measured drive of his horse reaching its stride. Confidently, he looked behind. He'd picked the right horse. They were outrunning the sheriff's posse.

DESERT GIFT

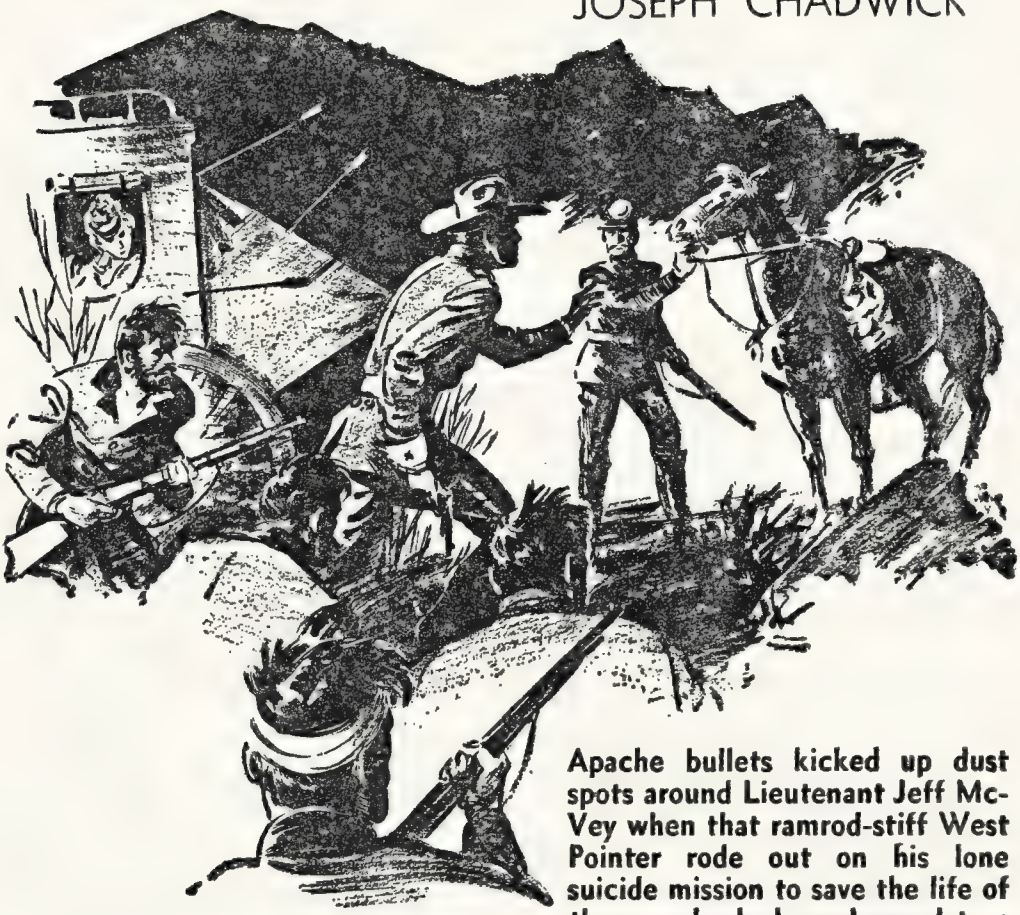
By JOSEPH CHADWICK

AFTER three months of lonely and hazardous outpost duty at the Larue relay stage station, K Troop was relieved by a column under Colonel Ben Ross. Numbering forty men and forty-eight mounts in the beginning, K now could muster, in varying degrees of unfitness, only thirty-two men and thirty-nine horses. Apache bullets had taken a toll of five troopers, including the troop's commanding officer, and desertions accounted for three others. The dead horses had been lost to sand fever. Taking much of men, the Arizona desert gave little in return.

"Lieutenant McVey!"

The colonel always bellowed. He was an old Indian-fighter, a bewhiskered, canvas-coated, mule-riding man who, in the secret opinion of First Lieutenant Jeff McVey, disgraced the military profession. McVey himself, new to the frontier, was a spit-and-polish officer. He carried himself always with a parade ground air, and he held to the military niceties. Now, riding up from his place in the blue-clad column, McVey saluted and said, "Yes, sir?"

The colonel grunted, and said, much too



Gun in hand, McVey started for his horse.

Apache bullets kicked up dust spots around Lieutenant Jeff McVey when that ramrod-stiff West Pointer rode out on his lone suicide mission to save the life of the man he had condemned to a traitor's living hell!

loud, "McVey, meet Lieutenant Allister."

McVey shook hands with young Allister of the desert-worn K Troop. Allister's face had the thin, pinched look of a sick man. He could not smile. He was burnt dark by sun and desert wind, yet McVey's critical eyes detected an underlying pallor. The man, McVey decided, belonged in an infirmary bed. Aloud, he said, "Glad to know you, Lieutenant."

"You may as well be, McVey," Colonel Ross growled. "You're taking command of K. Your orders are to get the troop back to Fort Hardin by the most direct route, and you're not to dawdle on the way."

Jeff McVey frowned, almost protested. His pride was sharply stung by his having to act as nurse-maid to an invalided troop. But he could only salute and say, "Yes, sir," and try to keep a shade of respect in his tone.

Ross' column, made up of two fresh troops of U. S. Cavalry, swung away and left a slowly settling yellow fog of dust. It was on the trail of the wily, marauding Apache. McVey silently cursed his luck and turned to his unpleasant task. He called an inspection, which turned out to be a sorry affair. K Troop's horses were too thin, and at least two of them were fever stricken. The men were in as poor a condition, and McVey, noting body sores and bad teeth, asked of Lieutenant Allister, "What ails these men?"

"Scurvy, sir."

"What's the cause—improper food?"

"That's it," Allister said. "We've been living on weevil-infested hardtack and bacon so old and dried up it's as bitter as quinine. The cure would be fresh vegetables and fruit—which we haven't got."

McVey nodded, and faced the troopers lined up by their mounts. They were a hard-bitten outfit, backed by a row of weather-faded tents. The faces of the men were gaunt, leathery, some in need of a razor. Uniforms were untidy and worn, boots were cracked and run down, and there needed to be a polishing of accoutrements. Here and there a cheek bulged with the suspicion of a tobacco cud. One trooper was hatless, because of a soiled bandage about his head. Another had an arm in a sling. Beyond the camp—McVey's gaze drifted—were five cross-marked graves. A hell of a troop, thought McVey.

"As you've no doubt guessed," he told the assembled men, "you're riding out of this malpais. We're heading for Fort Hardin, by the most direct route, and we'll march as rapidly as the horses permit. No straggling will be permitted."

He glanced at Allister. "We'll break camp, Lieutenant."

Orders were given to a sergeant, who relayed them to the troop in a loud but listless voice. There was a stir of movement, but the work was not done as smartly as McVey would have wished. He told Lieutenant Allister, "We'll drill this troop, once it's back at Hardin and rested."

Allister gave him an odd look. "Yes, sir. . . ." he said uncertainly.

McVey's critical eyes watched the tents struck, and he frowned over what he regarded as a bungling of even such a minor duty. He had been in the Territory less than a month, having come straight from a cavalry post outside Washington. Prior to his tour of duty near the Capital, he had had the good fortune to be a military attache to several American Embassies in Europe. He had viewed parade drills of the British Army, and absorbed some of the traditions of Her Majesty's regiments. He had acquainted himself with the French Army, and he had watched a huge review of the arrogant Prussian Army. Now, watching his own command, McVey felt a squirming of his soldier's soul. Here was no pageantry of marching men, no resounding trumpets, no banners bright in the sun.

"Lieutenant, we've got shirkers in this troop."

"Excuse me, sir," said Allister, in a thin-lipped way. "We've got some sick men here."

McVey's face grew rocky, and he watched the plodding troopers with an angered gaze. Seldom did he permit himself to consider enlisted men as individuals, for it was his theory that the uniform made all men one. But now he made a mental note of one man and another, and finally he was watching—staring at—a tall bronzed man who was doing the work of two men.

"Allister, who's the man with the straggly yellow mustache?"

"Faraday, sir."

"Looks like a good soldier."

The young lieutenant nodded. "That's right," he said, the scant praise making him brighten. "A good man—in every way."

"How come he doesn't rate a sergeant's stripes?"

"He refuses to be graded higher than a private," Allister said.

Tents came down, packs were made. The tall trooper, Faraday, was here and there and everywhere, giving a helping hand to the slower men. McVey's steely gaze followed Faraday's movements, and the officer became aware of something strange. Faraday kept his wide-brimmed campaign hat low on his brow, so that it shadowed his eyes. Faraday deliberately kept his back turned in McVey's direction. Suspicion tugged at McVey's mind. There was a stirring in McVey's memory.

"I've known that Faraday somewhere," said McVey, thinking aloud.

Finally, K Troop was mounted and on the march. It left behind the bleak adobe relay station, and trailed along the stage road. Fort Hardin was a three-day march.

IN MID-AFTERNOON, the troop had to swing off the road and permit the east-bound stage, headed for Lordsburg, to roll by. The red Concord on its bright yellow wheels, behind its six little Spanish mules, loomed and was gone almost before the road was cleared. The stage driver yelped a greeting, the shotgun messenger jerked a nod, and a couple of arms waved from the coach. Swinging back onto the road, K Troop plodded on.

At sundown, the troop pitched camp by a water-hole not far from the stage road. The cook tent was set up first, and the troop cook fell to work. Horses were watered, grained, after being rubbed down, and then the other tents were raised. Lieutenant Allister invited Jeff McVey, with polite formality, to share his tent. When mess was served, the two officers ate together in silence. Allister seemed too tired for conversation, and McVey was probing his memory. Throughout the day's march, his mind had been tormented by the big, bronzed trooper, Faraday. McVey knew the man. He had known him, somewhere. He was sure of it.

A man with but half an eye could have seen that Faraday was the best soldier of K Troop, barring not even Lieutenant Allister. Now, with darkness closing down, Faraday was working on the two wounded men—treating their old hurts with some sort of medicine and applying fresh bandages. And always he kept his distance from McVey. Once, however, he looked up and found McVey watching him. For a brief moment their eyes met and locked, in the ruddy glow of a campfire, then Faraday turned away and let the darkness swallow him. It was then that the fingertips of McVey's mind almost remembered.

Allister went to make an inspection of the sentries and the picket line, and it was while he was gone that McVey looked up from lighting his pipe to find Faraday standing at rigid attention before him.

"Sir, may I have a word with the lieutenant?" Faraday requested.

"You may, Faraday."

For an instant, the trooper's military mien seemed to desert him. His broad shoulders slumped and his handsome face went slack. He was older than McVey had judged, in his forties. There was a touch of gray at his temples. But the lax moment passed, and Faraday stood straight again.

"I think the lieutenant recognizes me, sir," the man said. "This is the first time I've run up against anyone familiar with my past, sir, and I would like the lieutenant to take into consideration my record during the past five years—"

McVey had it then. His mind said, Lowe—Captain Russ Lowe! He was jolted, shocked, and he grabbed the pipe from his mouth and came to his feet to face the man who, nearly seven years before, had caused an Army scandal which almost brought on a Congressional investigation of the War Department.

McVey said, flat-voiced, "Rumor had it that you'd fled to Mexico, Captain Lowe."

"Mexico is just a step from Arizona, sir," said Faraday, his eyes bleak. "I am no man to live in a foreign country."

"You have the gall to wear the uniform you once disgraced!"

Faraday winced. "There's no stain on it, now," he said, and now he forgot that he was an enlisted man talking to an officer. "I ask no more than to be permitted to wear a private's uniform, McVey. Damn it, man; have some feeling! Consider how you would feel in my place!"

"Impossible, Faraday—if that's what you want to be called," said McVey. "I couldn't be in your place. You know as well as I what must be done. An officer is responsible for his command, and he can't risk having his command endangered by the wrong sort of men. When we reach Fort Hardin, I'll place your case before the post's commanding officer."

"McVey, if you've got a heart—"

"You don't belong in uniform, Faraday."

"It's the only life I know," the man said, his voice was pitched low but it shook with anger. "If you would only let me explain. . . . I made a mistake, McVey—I admit it! I made a fool of myself over a woman. I fell in love with her, believing that she was as good as she was beautiful. She wasn't. McVey, she was rotten at the core—as rotten as I was weak. Before I realized it, she had me turned into a thief with her constant demands for more and more money. She wanted finery, clothes and jewelry. Can't you see, McVey?"

"An officer and a gentleman, you once called yourself," McVey said, with brutal mockery. "Now you hide behind a woman's skirts!"

"I fled from arrest," Faraday said, "to shield her—not myself."

"Well, it's an interesting story, Private Faraday," McVey told him. "The post commandant at Hardin may be amused by it. I'm not."

Faraday stiffened, all soldier again. "Is that your decision, sir?"

"That's it," McVey said.

He watched the man salute, about-face and march away. For a long moment, he stood lost in thought. His mind was uneasy. He'd seen the hatred in Faraday's eyes, just as the man turned away, and the thought occurred to him that Faraday might attempt to silence him before the troop reached Fort Hardin. A disturbing thought. A knife in the dark, a carbine going off by accident. . . . McVey relighted his pipe. This time it tasted foul.

McVEY was seven years out of West Point, and his Army career was the only thing that had meaning for him. He lived an almost monkish life, never permitting women to distract him from the goal he had set for himself—the attainment of high rank. If his climb was slow, if he still remained a first lieutenant, he blamed not himself but lack of promotions in a small army. There was a hardness in him, and he existed within a shell of his own making. Few men called him friend, and to any Army post social event he would come stag. His only vice, if vice it was, was his pipe. He seldom took a drink. Gambling for money held no attraction for him. So this night, lying wakefully in his blankets in Lieutenant Allister's tent, he could not justify Faraday's excuse that he had erred because of a woman.

He let his memory review Faraday's case. He, McVey, had been just out of the Point at the time, and attached to desk duty in the Quartermaster Corps in the War Department at Washington. Faraday, then Captain Russ Lowe, had been in the same branch. An irregularity of accounts and requisitions for supplies and equipment had been found and, after much investigation, traced to Faraday. The officer had been requisitioning vast amounts of food, blankets, ammunition and arms, and even horses and building materials, and turning these things over to a civilian merchandising firm. McVey had been on the investigation detail. The guilty officer, however, had gotten wind of the suspicion directed at him, and had disappeared.

And all because of a woman, McVey thought.

To his way of thinking, it was almost unbelievable. A man should be able to tell whether a woman is good or bad, McVey told himself—just as one is able to judge a man or a horse. It seemed odd to McVey that he should be sleepless because of his talk with Faraday. It was strange that he should keep hearing the man say, "McVey if you have a heart—"

McVey had a heart. But he told himself it belonged to the Army, and so finally slept.

In the morning, he expected to find that Faraday had slipped away under cover of darkness and deserted. But the tall man was still in camp, once again giving a helpful hand wherever needed. Once he was busy with the horses, then he gave the troop cook a hand. He examined the two wounded men, and McVey heard him telling one of the troopers suffering most from scurvy that there was nothing he could do for

the uncomfortable disease. And Faraday seemed to have forgotten the talk he had had with McVey.

Camp was broken, and the troop was on the move again. An hour after leaving the camp site, one of the lead horses collapsed under its pack and delayed the march. The animal, stricken with sand fever, had to be shot. McVey noted that several of the men were suffering agony from the sores and toothache brought on by the scurvy. He kept the troop moving at its best pace, but even so was impatient.

The day was like every other desert day, a hell of blazing sun and scorching heat, and in their weakened condition men and horses suffered. McVey thought of Colonel Ross' command with a great bitterness of mind, telling himself that he belonged with a column able to really take to the field. Ross' troopers would be fighting Apaches, while he had to bear the shame of marching into Fort Hardin with a command beaten by sickness! Had there been no one to hear, McVey would have cursed his luck.

The small column still followed the stage road, and at mid-day had to swing off the road again to permit the passage of a stage. This time it was that west-bound stage that left K Troop in a fog of dust. After a two-hour, noon-day bivouac, the column resumed its march. As far as the eye could see, the desert was empty of humans and human habitations. There was only sand and cactus and rocks. With Ross' column trailing the Apaches, McVey gave no thought to the marauders. So it was a shock to him when the stage which had passed by hours earlier came racing back with its driver shouting, "Apaches!"

The stage hauled up, its mules lathered and blowing. One of the animals had a gunshot wound, and an arrow shaft protruded from the rump of another. Arrows bristled from the Concord coach, and there were at least a dozen bullet holes. The shotgun messenger was dead, slumped down into the boot. The driver's shirt was patched with a spreading red stain. "Take a look at the passengers," he said.

McVey told Lieutenant Allister to make ready for an attack, even though no Indians were in sight. He called to Faraday, and said, "See what you can do for the driver." He then opened the coach door.

Frightened faces looked at him, one the face of a woman. McVey touched his hat, and said, "Madam, you are safe now."

He gave her his hand, helped her descend. She was young, tall, with clear blue eyes and auburn hair—and the face of a saint. She was more fashionably dressed than any of the officers' ladies at Fort Hardin. She was like a part of the East McVey so lately had left—a hat adorned with gay artificial flowers, a jacket with leg-of-mutton sleeves and wasp-like waist. Her billowy skirt revealed, as she stepped lightly down, a hint of slender ankles. Her wavering smile, both frightened and courageous, went straight to McVey's heart.

"I'm so glad we found you, Captain."

"Lieutenant," said McVey. "Lieutenant Jeffrey McVey, at your service."

"My name is Miss Clark. Bonnie Clark."

"The pleasure," murmured McVey, "is all mine."

THERE were four other passengers, male passengers, but they, because of the girl, were rather obscure to McVey. One was a whiskey drummer, bound for Sacramento. Another was a bearded prospector. The third was a Texas cattleman. The fourth—a darkly handsome man—was a lawyer named Len Macklin and the girl's uncle. Bonnie Clark introduced each man to McVey, and they told him what had happened.

The stagecoach had been more than an hour's drive past the column when a band of Apaches had appeared from nowhere. The shotgun messenger had been killed almost at once, but O'Grady, the driver, had swung the stage about and made a run for it. He had been wounded when the Apaches came riding in pursuit. All four men passengers were armed, and they had opened fire on the raiders. At least two Apaches had been dropped from their ponies, and after a chase of about three miles the others had swung away. Only one of the passengers, the Texas cattleman, had been wounded. An arrow had driven through his left arm, and he had cut the shaft and removed it. Bonnie Clark had bandaged his wound with a strip torn from her petticoat. In reply to McVey's query, the passengers said that there had been at least twenty Apaches in the band.

O'Grady, who would do no driving for a time, told McVey that the band which had raided the stagecoach had been but a part of a larger group of hostiles. "I could see them about two miles off," he said. "Looked to me like fifty or more in the other band."

The driver lay on an Army blanket, in the scant shade of the coach. An Apache arrow had struck him in the left shoulder, and a rifle bullet had smashed his left ribs. Each breath he drew caused him agonizing pain. It had been a miracle, a wounded man swinging a stagecoach about and outracing Apache raiders. Faraday was bandaging O'Grady's wounds with expert skill, and finally said, "You'll have to ride inside your coach, friend."

"Something I never did in all my life."

"Well, you can't start any younger," McVey told him. "I'll have a trooper drive the stage. We'll escort you as far as Fort Hardin."

"Hell, man! We can't poke along like you soldiers!"

"You can, and you will," McVey said flatly.

The decision was his, and the passengers had been frightened enough to agree with him. The dead shotgun messenger, a man named Judson, was buried there in the wasteland. O'Grady was placed inside the coach despite his protests, and a trooper was placed upon the box. The stage took a place in the middle of the column, and was escorted along at a slow but steady pace. The two hit mules were but slightly hurt, and they were kept in harness. Once, late in the afternoon, two Apaches were seen far across the desert. They were trailing south.

An hour before sundown, the column reached Peso Creek. McVey gave the order to halt and make camp, deciding that it was best to make bivouac before dusk and by water. If an attack came, it would be either at dusk or at dawn. Lieutenant Allister agreed with McVey that the danger of an Apache attack was real, and that by camping by water the troop would be in fair condition to resist such an attack.

Sentries were posted, the horses put on picket line, and the stagecoach was run into the center of the camp. Only the cook tent and Allister's tent were pitched, the lieutenant offering his to Bonnie Clark for the approaching night. The troop cook prepared his poor mess of bacon, coffee, and hardtack, and scattered his fire before dusk. The passengers accepted the Army grub, but ate little of it. Bonnie Clark was outraged when McVey told her that such food was the troop's daily fare, and he smilingly told her, "Nowadays, the Army is the country's unwanted step-child. We earn our salt, but don't always get it."

THE purplish dusk blanketed the desert, and the sentries walked their posts without reporting signs of Apaches. The other troopers lounged about in the gathering darkness, keeping their carbines and sabers at hand. McVey noticed that there was a discussion on; it involved but four men at first, then at least a dozen. Some sort of a low-voiced argument had broken out, and Faraday was one of those in it. McVey found Bonnie Clark smiling at him, and he crossed to her. She stood outside the tent she was to occupy.

"I don't feel at all afraid, now," she told McVey. "There's no danger, is there?"

"If an attack comes, we'll be able to beat it off."

"I know you will, Lieutenant," the girl said, and gazed at him with trusting eyes. "I'll sleep well, knowing you're watching out for me—and the others."

She would have entered the tent, but McVey, suddenly wanting her to talk more, said quickly, "You're going to California, Miss Clark?"

"Yes. To Sacramento, and then Frisco. My uncle is going to open a law office in Frisco." She was suddenly shy. "Do you ever come to California?"

"I've never been there, but now I'll surely make the trip."

"You will? Why?"

"Don't you know?" McVey said, and wondered if there already was a man in her life. He was charmed by Bonnie Clark. "When you are there, California will have something I want to see. Or am I too bold. . . ?"

"Bold, Lieutenant? Oh, I don't think so."

"Perhaps if I sounded out your uncle—"

"I'm sure that isn't necessary. I'm twenty-one, you see, and so I don't really need a guardian. If I wish to have a suitor—" A look of consternation spread

over her pretty face. "Oh, now I'm being too bold. You must excuse me, Lieutenant!"

She could not escape, however, for McVey had caught hold of her hands. It was dark now, and his quick glance around showed no one watching. McVey said, "I'll see you in Frisco, Bonnie. . . ." He bent his head and kissed her on the mouth. The girl gasped, and whispered, "You mustn't, really!" But her voice was not angry. McVey smiled and released her, permitted her now to enter the tent. He turned away, a changed man. The hardness had gone out of his face. He felt like singing. . . . And then he saw two men standing there in the gloom.

The girl's uncle, Len Macklin, stood some distance off, puffing on a cheroot. The nearer man was in uniform—Faraday.

"Well, man? What do you want? Speak up!"

"Sir, some of the men named me as their spokesman," Faraday said tonelessly. "I approached Lieutenant Allister with the request, but he said that the lieutenant must approve of the matter."

McVey said curtly, "What matter?" He was touchy because he suspected that both this trooper and Len Macklin had witnessed his romantic little scene with Bonnie Clark. "Talk up, man!"

"It's like this, sir," Faraday said, "most of the men are suffering badly from the scurvy." He stood rigidly at attention, every inch of him the soldier, but his metallic eyes glinted coldly. There was hatred in Faraday's eyes, and it was for McVey. "As the lieutenant knows, sir, a change of diet would help the men. On the troop's way to Larue Station, three months ago, it crossed this creek upstream about three miles. There's an abandoned ranchhouse up the Peso, sir, and by it there's a patch of wild onions."

"Onions!" McVey said, almost shouting. "Are you crazy, Faraday?"

"Sir, it's not my idea. I'm only the spokesman for the others."

"All right—all right. What's your request?"

"The men would like to have the lieutenant's permission to go after a batch of those onions, sir. It would be as good as medicine for them."

"It's the craziest notion I ever heard!"

"Sir," said Faraday, an edge of mockery in his voice, "I told the others that the lieutenant would see it that way."

He saluted and about-faced. McVey was watching him march away when Bonnie came from the tent, and said quietly, "Jeff, how can you be so—so unfeeling? It makes me think you have no heart!"

McVey was jolted, for her words were almost what Faraday's had been when the man had begged him to overlook the past. There still was anger in McVey, but he tried to hide it from this girl who, though hardly more than a stranger to him, had become the most important person in his life. "You don't understand, Bonnie," he said. "We don't see any Apaches, but they may be out there in the dark. And to let some of my command risk their lives for some onions—well, it would be sheer madness."

"But your men look so sick, Jeff."

"Better to be sick, than dead."

"You're hard, Jeff—terribly hard."

It seemed to McVey that he could feel Bonnie Clark slipping away from him, even as she stood beside him. The feeling frightened him, and he said, "It's against my better judgment, but I'll risk one man."

The girl's hand reached up and caressed his cheek as he turned away.

He strode to where Faraday stood among a group of other troopers, and he said flatly, "In two days at the most, we'll be at Fort Hardin where the whole troop will be given medical treatment. If you men can't wait that long, you have my permission to send one man to that onion patch. That man will have to be a volunteer."

"I'm that man," said a voice.

It was Faraday's voice.

A MAN'S career, his life, his destiny, could hinge on some small thing. Even though knowing that, McVey considered it strange that his career should be endangered by an onion. He knew that the permission he had given Faraday might well wreck his plans for the future. Should the trooper die in an Apache ambush, a report setting forth the circumstances of his death would have to be made. And such a report would reflect upon McVey as an officer. Strange indeed, thought McVey. All his life, he had hated onions as a teetotaler hated whiskey. He could not bear the smell

or taste of the vegetable. He was sourly amused.

But it was too late to change his decision, for Faraday already had ridden from camp. The troopers had cheered his departure, and now they stood about in the darkness listening—listening no doubt for the crack of an Apache rifle and the scream of a mortally hit man. But no such sound came. The desert night was eerily silent.

Lieutenant Allister appeared from an inspection tour, and said, "Glad you saw it the troop's way, sir. The men have been talking about that onion patch all day, though it's odd how they remembered it after three months. A handful of onions now will do them more good than some fool medicine later on."

"If Faraday gets through, Dave," said McVey, using the younger officer's given name for the very first time. "What do you think of his chances?"

"I've a hunch there are Apaches out there," Allister said. "But if it's possible for a man to elude them, Faraday is that man."

"You think a lot of Faraday, Dave?"

"I have my doubts about his past," said Allister, "but when it comes to soldiering I like Faraday's sort serving under me."

The camp settled down for the night, but not to sleep. There would be no sleep that night for any of K Troop until Faraday returned. McVey risked an occasional match to glance at his watch, and when two hours were gone he began to grow restless. He said, then, "What do you think, Dave?"

Before Allister could reply, the night quiet was shattered by a far-off burst of gunfire. The whole camp roused, with men grabbing for their weapons. The distant guns crashed for perhaps five minutes, though it seemed to McVey an eternity, then a heavy silence closed down. Men stared at one another, and here and there one cursed under his breath. Then a sentry shouted, "Rider coming!"

McVey barked an order, deploying the troopers to fight off an attack. With pistol in hand, he ran forward and joined the sentry who had called out. The trooper shouted, "Here's a horse, sir!" and caught the bridle reins of a riderless mount. Faraday's mount.

The horse was skittish, lathered and blowing. Its reins were tied back, so that it would keep moving without a rider. A bulging flour sack was tied to the saddle, and by the smell McVey knew that the bag contained onions. The sentry swore and muttered, "They got him, sir. Those Apache devils got him!"

McVey nodded. "A man's life for a bag of onions."

He was not thinking of the report he would have to make out, nor of the black mark such a report would give to his record. He was thinking that no matter what his past had been, Faraday had been a good man.

The night passed, the early dawn bloomed into full daylight, and no attack came. McVey guessed that the ever wily Apaches were not strong enough in numbers to risk a raid against a cavalry troop. K Troop went quietly about its morning chores of caring for and saddling their mounts, and mess was more unappetitizing than ever before. McVey noted that the sack of onions lay untouched on the ground. No matter how keenly some of the men were suffering, they could not touch medicine that had cost so high a price.

The troop was finally mounted and the stagecoach ready to pull out. McVey sat his horse, reluctant to give the order to march. Lieutenant Allister glumly watched him. McVey said at last, "My orders were to proceed to Fort Hardin by the most direct route."

Allister knew what he meant, and replied, "No use going up the Peso, Jeff. There's nothing we can do for Faraday."

"We can give him a decent burial."

"Orders—" Allister began, and stopped speaking as gunfire opened up. Then he shouted, "Look at that, Jeff!"

McVey had already seen the stumbling blue-clad figure out across the desert flats. It was Faraday, fighting his way back to the troop. The big trooper was moving from one boulder to another, from brush clump to cactus stalk, firing his Navy Colt each time he took brief cover. McVey could not see the Apaches that were returning Faraday's fire, but he could see puffs of dust kick up around the man as bullets fell close. McVey said, "Dave, take command."

"The whole troop can ride out there, sir."

"No! It may be ambush. Those rocks could hide a hundred warriors," McVey told him curtly. "If Faraday and I don't make it, move out of here—fast. You're an Apache-fighter, and I'm not. You'll get the troop through."

HE TOUCHED spurs to his horse and lifted it into a hard run. He saw Faraday fall, saw him crawl behind a rock and in fumbling fashion reload his pistol. He also saw now the Apaches—four dismounted warriors naked except for breechclouts, bootlike moccasins and red headbands. The four were firing at Faraday with rifles and swiftly closing in. McVey drew close enough to see the dark, squat faces. . . . He swung his pistol up, and fired. It was a wild shot, but it served to scatter the Apaches. McVey saw the four run toward their ponies. He swung over toward Faraday, reined sharply in. "Come on, man—quick!"

He freed his left stirrup, so that Faraday could step up. Even then, he had to pull at the man to get him up behind the saddle. Faraday was wounded. He had been hit several times.

McVey turned back as soon as Faraday's arms caught hold of him, but even so it was a race. The Apaches came sweeping through the rocks, rushing after them, shooting and yelling. But Lieutenant Allister had sent half a dozen troopers out to cover McVey's return, and their carbine fire drove the Apaches off. Abruptly, the blast of guns died away.

The hostile desert lay behind, and bedraggled K Troop rode with a show of smartness through the stockade gates at Fort Hardin. McVey had the stagecoach driven close to the post infirmary, so that the two wounded men—O'Grady and Faraday—would not have to be carried far.

After dismissing the troop, McVey crossed to the stage. Orderlies had already removed the two hurt men into the infirmary. The stage passengers, Bonnie Clark with the four men, were wondering now if a driver would be furnished to take them further along their route to California. The girl smiled at McVey, touched his arm.

"Jeff, you were wonderful—there on the desert," she said, and her eyes were aglow.

"One minute," said an angry voice.

Len Macklin pushed between them, his dark face scowling. "Lieutenant, I don't know what sort of plans you're making," he said, savagely. "But whatever they are, you can forget them. I'm not a lawyer, and I'm not this girl's uncle. Her imagination ran away with her. I'm a gambler by profession, and Bonnie Clark is no more than a honkytonk singer—a percentage girl. I'm telling you this for your own good—and because if any man has a claim to her, it's me. You, McVey—"

His voice died away in a gasp, for McVey had hit him. It was not a calculated blow, but one of quick temper. Macklin's knees buckled. The gambler fell sprawling, rolled over onto his face, lay still. McVey turned to the girl. The glow had gone from her eyes, and her lips were quivering.

"I lied," she whispered, dully. "You made me want to be something I'm not, or ever have been. I've worked in honkytonks, and I'll work in another when I get to Frisco." Something like a sob welled up in her. "I was alone . . . my parents had died. I was only sixteen, and I didn't know what to do. Things aren't easy for a girl. Oh, I know it can't be excused! What he said is true—all of it, except that he has no claim on me!"

There on the ground, Len Macklin began to groan. Bonnie turned away from McVey, but he caught hold of her arm.

"I hit him because no man has a right to talk that way about a woman—to put that kind of meaning into his words," McVey said. "Bonnie, it's not the past that counts, but the future."

"Jeff!"

"Our future, Bonnie," said McVey. "Wait here for me."

He swung away, strode into the infirmary, and the post surgeon was already examining Faraday's wounds. McVey stood beside the table upon which the trooper lay. There was a question in Faraday's eyes.

And McVey answered it by saying, "Faraday, I've discovered that no man has the right to judge the mistakes of another. The past has no meaning."

"You mean, sir?"

"We'll campaign together, again," said McVey, and reached out to touch Faraday's limp hand.

ALL HELL ON HORSEBACK!

By NAT W. McKELVEY

Assorted mayhem in the dusty arena, or sudden death beneath flailing hooves—it was all in the day's play for the old-time rodeo hands, and the wild gauchos of the Southern pampas!

MODERN horsemen of rodeo, steeplechase and polo fame are soft compared with old time bulldoggers and bulltailers and sporting gents who gleefully risked their necks at *el pato.*

It was in 1903, near Austin, Texas, that a cowhand named Tom Pickett conceived bulldogging. Rawboned, hefty Tom thought it might be amusing to throw himself from a galloping horse onto the horns of a running steer.

So he got one of his cowboy friends to haze, chase a steer in a straight line. When the steer had attained a good start, Pickett, mounted on a fast horse, came tearing after. As his bronc pulled alongside the scampering target, Tom flung himself overboard, grabbing the steer's flashing horns. Twisting the animal's neck until it turned nose and mouth skyward, the waddy sank his teeth into the steer's upper lip.

From here to the finish, it became a matter of strong bicuspids, plenty of weight, and unadulterated guts. Once he had a good bite on the steer's lip, Pickett would let go his hold on the horns and throw himself backward. Pain from the bulldogger's bite would force the 1,200 pound steer to the ground.

Tom Pickett's feat became immediately popular. From picnics, fairs, exhibitions, and rodeos, he took bulldogging to the famed wildwest show of the 101 Ranch. In 1907, while performing his specialty at the Jamestown Exposition, Pickett received an injury. So an Arizonian, Lon Sealy of Nogales, substituted for Tom.

Bulldogging took its name from the bulldog bite the "dogger" applied to the steer's lip. In performing the stunt, Sealy, like Pickett and other pioneers, relied on his teeth to bring down the steer.

For years bulldogging held undisputed top honors as rodeo's most dangerous event. Even after biting and hoolihaning had been outlawed, bulldoggers netted more broken bones, gored bellies, and cracked heads than any other Wild West equestrian. Only with the introduction of the Brahma bull into riding events, with a corresponding rise in bullriding casualties, did dogging steers slip into second place.

But if bulldogging has gone somewhat sissy to conform to modern standards of humaneness, its predecessor, bulltailing, has not. Still a favorite with *vaqueros* of the remote ranges of Mexico, this hell-for-leather pastime had its origin with cowboys of southern Texas.

From a pen of big steers or vicious wild bulls, a likely critter would be "hoorawed" into the open. Yelling like a war-crazy Comanche, a puncher would swoop on the fleeing bull, lay his horse in close, and grab the bull's tail. Taking a couple of hitches around the saddle horn, the waddy would then spur his bronc away at a slight angle, busting the bull to the ground with terrific power.

But for sheer mayhem willingly entertained, history records few sports to equal the old-time Argentine gaucho's game, *El Pato.* By comparison, American polo is a nursery pastime, and yet, of all modern sports, polo most closely approaches for danger and lunacy the gaucho's best loved athletic contest.

El Pato, played without time limit, without referee, and without boundaries, adds knife fights and fist fights to the turbulence of tug-o-war, wrestling, hockey, and polo.

TO PLAY, the contestants require a dead duck—*el pato*—enclosed in a leather bag to which are fixed four loop-like handles of rawhide. The bag itself, no larger than a basketball, is stitched up tight.

Carrying this strange ball, a horseman rides to a predetermined spot where a hundred or more riders wait. When they sight the ball-carrier, they immediately charge him, each mounted man intent on snatching the ball and making off with it.

Head-on crashes are the order of the day. Skulls are cracked, ribs fractured, arms and legs broken. In the excitement,

pyretic players frequently pause to slash each other with knives or crack craniums with the heavy *bolas,* an instrument for bringing down fleeing horses or cattle. In the blood and thunder melee, horses will break legs, or they will drop dead from being over-ridden. Nobody cares.

Riveted to the sack, the four leather handles may be grabbed by four muscular players, each spurring his bronc in a different direction. The player who yields to this force loses face. Yet, obviously, something must give. It may be an arm wrenched from its socket or a breaking saddle cinch. It may be an unseated rider, or a horse staggering from exhaustion. Rarely, in the face of such pressure, does the well constructed leather bag collapse.

At length, when one rider has acquired *el pato* and eluded all other players, he is declared victor. He will gallop to a nearby house where the entire mob, weary, sweating, and bleeding, will gorge on a barbecue and dance for the rest of the night.

El Pato is probably the most reckless game known to man. It has all the elements of a Roman gladiatorial contest, where men hack each other to pieces with broad swords. It lacks none of the impact of a pair of armored knights, charging each other on horseback. And surely, *El Pato* embraces the inherent fatality of a game of Russian poker. Out of a hundred participants, someone is certain to be killed, just as when six men spin the cylinder of a revolver with only one bullet and pull the trigger someone will find death.

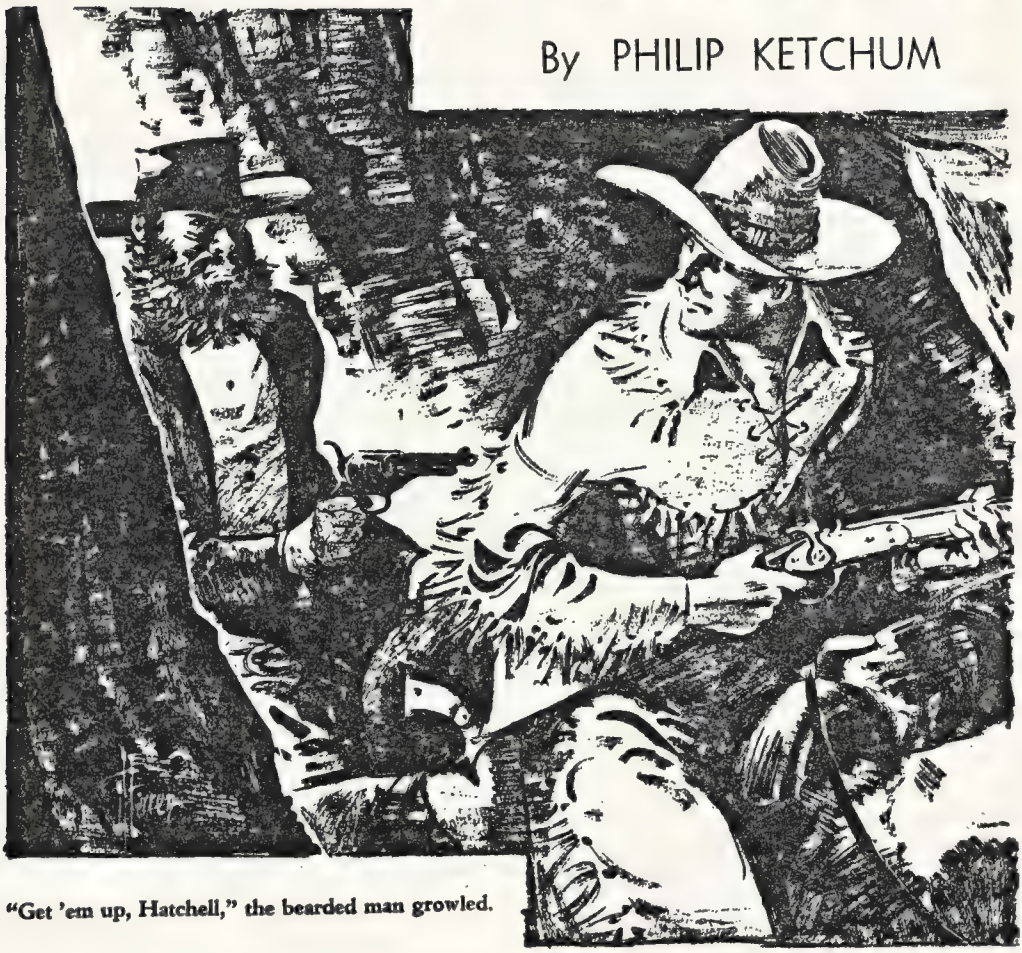
The rider drew alongside the steer and flung himself overboard. . . .

Even the gauchos no longer play *El Pato.* Yes, they, like other modern horsemen, have turned sissy. But is there anything wrong with having your sport and living too?

Relatively speaking, modern equestrians may be soft, but at least most of them have the satisfaction of dying of old age.

FIGHTING SONS OF

By PHILIP KETCHUM



"Get 'em up, Hatchell," the bearded man growled.

CHAPTER ONE

Westward Lies the Trail

SEATED on the tongue of his Conestoga wagon, Henry Hatchell made the daily entry in his journal. He wrote carefully and in a neat, round script:

"Westport Landing, Mo., April 30, 1845.
"All is in readiness and we jump off tomorrow, God willing. The waiting has been long and tiresome, and a trial to our patience. The evil of this town has been a continuous temptation to some of those who go with us. The day is again cloudy and cold but there has been no more rain. Each wagon will overburden itself with a hundred pounds of grain, or more, so that we will have sufficient feed to last our mules and horses until grass is plentiful. There is a possibility that there will be twenty-five in our company instead of twenty-four. A young lady who arrived here this morning under strange circumstances is desirous of going with us. I do not look with

Before those wagon-train trail-blazers lay the perilous Indian country; behind them, the failures that had caused them to take the Conestoga trail westward; and with them they carried one stowaway—a runaway, Boston-bred girl—whose fare must be paid in pioneer lives!

THE OREGON TRAIL

Gripping Novel of Wagon-train War!

favor upon the addition of an unmarried female to our company. In the wagon train which Sam Shem led across the plains and mountains to the Oregon country last year, there was such a woman, attractive but with a small soul. The jealousies and bitterness which her mannerisms and conduct evoked, led to continuous dissension and strife. This young woman, who calls herself Katherine Lowell, may be of a more gentle disposition, but she is still a female and unattached and I have troublesome misgivings for the days ahead. My wife, Edith, has taken an unusual interest in her, and should my wife persist in her determination that she go with us, I shall defer to her judgement. The young woman arrived here garbed in men's clothing. Saul Rusk has been drinking overly much, and during these weeks of delay has been a sore trial to his patient wife. It will be good when we are under way."

Hatchell put down his pen and carefully stoppered the bottle of ink which he had brought with him. He waited until what he had written had dried, then closed the journal and carried it and his ink and pen to the strong box under the high seat of the wagon. He was a short man and stocky, just past fifty years of age. He had iron-gray hair and dark, thoughtful eyes. He was a graduate of Harvard college and had been a preacher, a store keeper and a farmer. A restlessness which he kept well hidden had stood in the way of his ever settling down at one job and this same

Waving his hat, Mark rode in with the glad tidings.

restlessness was now driving him to a new venture.

Mark Hatchell, Henry's son, was twenty-one today. He was a tall young man with wide, powerful shoulders and a well knit body. His hair was lighter than his father's and had a slight curl, but Mark had the same square face and the same, slow manner of speech. He had hoped that the wagon train might get under way by the last day of April and thus mark his birth date, but they hadn't quite made it.

This afternoon he had been helping Arne Simpson replace one of the wheels of his wagon. After they had finished he inspected the job and said to Arne, "All we need now is three more wheels and you might make it."

Arne Simpson shrugged his thin shoulders. His pale face screwed up as he coughed.

"The other three wheels might hold up," he answered. "I reckon they've just got to hold up, Mark."

Norah Simpson and Saul Rusk came around the wagon from the direction of town. Norah was Arne Simpson's wife. A woman of about thirty, she was attractive, slender, dark haired. She and Saul were laughing about something. Saul Rusk was a short, heavy, powerfully-built man who had been an Ohio farmer.

"Got it fixed, I see," Rusk nodded, "but you'll never make it in that wagon."

"Then we'll walk," Arne replied.

Henry Hatchell had set up a tent near his wagon and the flap of the tent now opened. Mark saw his mother looking out. She called his name and Mark started that way.

"Find out about her for us, will you, Mark?" Rusk asked.

He was referring, Mark knew, to the woman who had arrived here in the camp this morning.

"She's an old friend of the family," Mark said over his shoulder.

MARK'S mother was a quiet, efficient, sort of woman a few years younger than his father. Mark had never seen her show any excitement or impatience, no matter what sort of trial she faced. She was nearly always cheerful but this afternoon as Mark came up to her he could see a worried frown on her face.

"Mark," she said, "I want you to do something for me."

"Sure, mother," Mark said easily.

"In town in front of Loeb's store there's a horse. It has two white front feet. I want you to get the horse and take it somewhere so that it won't be found for a while. If you took it out of town and turned it loose maybe an Indian would steal it. Yes, I think that's the thing to do."

Mark stared at his mother, hardly sure that he was hearing correctly. "You want me to take a horse and turn it loose where an Indian will find it?" he repeated.

"Yes, a horse that's in front of Loeb's store and has two white front feet. It's important to do it, Mark."

"It's the horse she rode here," Mark guessed.

His mother nodded.

"Is she going with us?"

Again his mother nodded.

"We could use the horse. She'll need one."

"Your father will buy one for her tonight."

"He'll pay a mighty high price for a horse in this town."

"Money won't be very important where we're going, Mark, for a long, long time."

Mark Hatchell frowned. He said, "Who is she, mother, and where is she from? Why do we have to get rid of the horse."

"Her name is Katherine Lowell and you can say that she's the daughter of an old friend of mine. That isn't strictly true, but I did know her mother. And Mark, don't tell anyone about the horse."

"I won't. It sounds like a crazy thing to do."

"You'll be careful, Mark. Don't ride too far away alone. If you just turned the horse free after dark wouldn't he run off? That is—the Indians—I know Sam Shem says they're pretty friendly around here, but—"

Mark grinned. He said, "I'll not ride far."

He tried to figure the thing out as he walked toward town but it wasn't something he could analyze. He wondered about Katherine Lowell. He had caught just a glimpse of her this morning and from her clothing and short hair he had thought that she was a boy. He had learned the

truth when his mother had barred his entrance to the tent after he had fetched several buckets of water. "She's bathing," his mother had said. "You can't go in now."

Remembering how close he had been to pushing right into the tent, Mark chuckled. There was a tree some twenty paces ahead. Mark drew his knife and threw it at the tree in the way Sam Shem had taught him but the throw wasn't very accurate and the knife glanced off. When Mark reached the knife he picked it up. He had a long ways to go before he could throw a knife as quickly and surely as the old scout who was making the journey with them to Oregon.

Town was crowded with people this late afternoon, men and women from the surrounding camps such as the one his father had established. There were gamblers waiting for the night and the games which would soon start, and blanketed Indians, begging food or just watching the restless movements of these white people who were pushing farther and farther west.

Mark spoke to half a dozen people he knew before he reached Loeb's store. He had no difficulty at all in picking out the horse his mother had described. There was only one with two white feet, a black, wiry mare. This was the horse Katherine Lowell had ridden to Westport Landing. He was sure of that. She had probably tied it here early this morning and then asked the way to the Hatchell camp. There probably wasn't anyone around now who had been here this morning or would remember who had left the mare. Mark told himself all this, but he still had a strangely uncomfortable feeling as he started to untie the bridle reins from the hitching rail.

"JUST a minute there," said a voice from the front of the store.

Mark turned around. A tall, heavy-set man who had been lounging against the store had taken a step forward and was scowling at him. The man was about thirty. He hadn't shaved for several days. He wore a rather good dark suit but one that was quite travel stained.

"Where are you taking that horse?" he asked bluntly.

Mark shrugged his shoulders and for a moment made no answer. He wondered if this man had seen Katherine Lowell leave the horse here and had recognized him as someone else, or if this man might be the one the girl was trying to escape—if that was what she was doing.

"Why, I'm riding to Independence, if it's any business of yours," Mark said finally.

"That horse is my business," the man answered. "Where's the boy who rode it here."

The man had hesitated slightly before he had said boy. Mark Hatchell again shrugged his shoulders. He said, "Stranger, you've got things all twisted. No boy rode this mare here."

He turned again toward the horse but before he could untie the reins a hand fell on his shoulder and he was jerked around.

"I want a straight answer from you," the man said flatly, "and, by God, I'm going to get it. Where is she?"

This time there was no question as to the pronoun. Mark sucked in a sharp, quick breath. The man was close to him, quite close to him, and Mark's hands came up and thrust against the fellow's chest, sending him backwards so that he almost fell.

"You had my answer," Mark grated. "It's all the answer you'll ever get."

A flush of anger darkened the man's face. He stepped in and swung viciously at Mark's head, and brought up his other fist in a blow aimed at the stomach. Mark ducked and backed away. He saw that a crowd was gathering and he knew what he might be in for. He had seen other fights in this street, fights which had ended with flashing knives and in sudden death. No one in Westport Landing attempted to keep order. A man's quarrels were his own business and others didn't interfere.

A blow rocked Mark on the side of the head; another smashed against his chest. Mark stabbed back at the man, catching him on the mouth. He side-stepped the man's rush and hit him again. Then moving in he put all the weight of his body behind more blows to the head.

The man reeled backwards but didn't go down. He lowered his head and came at Mark with both fists swinging in short, powerful arcs. He was bleeding at the nose but didn't seem aware of it. His breath was coming fast. He was heavier than Mark and his body was solid. Mark's

blows seemed to have had but little effect.

"You'll answer my questions," the man said between gasps. "You'll answer my questions if it's the last thing you ever do."

A blow caught Mark on the side of the jaw and another which he hadn't seen coming at all landed full in his face. Something tripped him and he went down. Still groggy, he rolled swiftly to one side barely in time to escape the kick which had been aimed at his head. The man kicked at him again and this time Mark grabbed the fellow's boot, pulled it down and rolled against it.

The man fell half across him, and was quick to get to his feet but Mark was up too. He caught a blow on the shoulder and felt another scrape past his face. He was still groggy. His vision was a little blurred. He stabbed his fists at the man before him and he tried to get some power in his blows but his arms didn't seem to have any strength left in them. He hit the man again and again but the man held his feet.

Mark knew that he couldn't stand up under another solid blow. He knew what to expect if he went down for this man had shown him how he fought. The man was still coming at him rather than backing away. Mark stepped to the side and suddenly the man's knees gave way and he went down and lay there in the street, flat on his face. He tried to push himself up but couldn't manage it.

Mark Hatchell could hardly manage to hold his body erect. He mopped a hand over his face and it came away sticky with his own blood from a cut on the forehead. It was hard to breathe. He looked around at the crowd which had gathered and was gradually conscious of the sound of voices. He looked at the man with whom he had fought and he knew just how close the margin of his victory had been.

"Nice battle, youngster," someone was saying. "I don't think I'd want to mix with you."

They were out in the center of the street, quite a ways from the place where the mare was tied. Mark didn't remember how the fight had carried them out here. He wasn't sure he could walk all the way back, but he had to do it. He turned and started for the horse. This wasn't important now, now, he told himself, unless they did more. That man could easily find out who he was and in the Hatchell camp would find the girl he was following.

Mark made it to where the mare was tied. He leaned for a moment against the hitching rail, breathing deeply and fighting against a sickness in his stomach. After a while he untied the bridle and managed to get into the saddle. The stirrups were much too short but he used them and he didn't ride toward Independence. He went directly back to the camp on the banks of the river.

CHAPTER TWO

Wagon Train Stowaway

WITHIN half an hour and while it was still light, the woman who had been called Katherine Lowell and who had arrived in camp so mysteriously that morning, left the camp alone, riding the white stockinged mare and circling the town of Westport Landing as she headed east. Henry Hatchell explained that she had wanted to go with them, but at the last moment had changed her mind. Mrs. Hatchell said that she was sorry, for Katherine was really a fine girl, even if she had cut off her hair and had dressed as a boy.

Mark had the amused sympathy of everyone in the camp. It was known that he had gone to town for the girl's horse and had run into a fight. The marks that he had on his face he had received in turn for a favor, and he hadn't even had an opportunity to talk to the girl he had been helping.

Supper was early and soon after supper those in the camp gathered around the fire. Excitement ran high. Katherine Lowell was forgotten and so was Mark's adventure. This was their last night before the jump-off, their last night in civilization. Tom Bellingham got out his fiddle and played one tune after another and everyone joined in the singing, even those who couldn't sing. All in the company were here tonight. That is, all but Sam Shem, the scout, whose duties didn't really start until after they were across the river and under way.

In the early evening while the singing was still at its peak, three men rode up to the camp, dismounted, tied their horses and moved into the circle of light made by

the campfire. All three carried carbines. One of the men was the fellow Mark had fought that afternoon. The other two were older and had hard, scowling faces.

Tom Bellingham, a quiet man about ten years older than Mark, went right ahead with the piece he was playing, though the singing dwindled away and died. There was a strangely stubborn streak in Tom Bellingham. From the appearance of the men, he might have guessed that some kind of trouble lay ahead, but he was playing a piece on his fiddle and he went ahead and finished it. Mark didn't get up. No one got up. All in the company sat and waited and the three men waited too while Tom went ahead scraping his bow across the fiddle. Mark, staring at the man he had fought, noted with considerable satisfaction that the man's face was as puffed and swollen and perhaps as painful as his own.

Tom came finally to the end of his piece, lowered his fiddle and looked questioningly at the men.

"Who's the leader of this company?" asked the man Mark had fought. "Where's Henry Hatchell?"

Henry Hatchell got to his feet. "That's my name," he said quietly. "What do you want?"

"I'm Arthur Overton of St. Louis."

Hatchell nodded.

"I followed a girl here," Overton went on. "She worked for my wife in St. Louis. She ran away with a pearl necklace which is worth a fortune. She was dressed like a boy and she probably had a fancy story to tell you but it's not true. Where is she?"

"Would she have called herself Katherine Lowell?" Hatchell asked.

"She might have called herself anything."

Hatchell frowned. "A girl dressed like a boy showed up here this morning. She seemed sick and my wife put her to bed. This afternoon she asked my son to go get her horse and he did. I reckon you know about that."

"I know about it," Overton snapped. "I could have your son arrested for what he did."

"Try it," Mark called out.

Several of the men around the fire laughed. Overton's hand fingered his carbine but he made no motion toward Mark. "Where is she?" he asked Hatchell.

"Why she rode out of here along about sundown headed in the direction of Independence."

Overton stared thoughtfully at Henry Hatchell. "I don't know whether to believe you or not."

"Men don't usually question my word," Hatchell answered sharply.

"I think I'll ask to search your wagons."

"You'll not search mine," said Tom Bellingham.

Henry Hatchell shook his head. "We'll let them look through the wagons, Tom," he suggested, "but we'll go with them to make sure that some of our valuable pearl necklaces don't disappear."

Again Arthur Overton fingered his carbine but he held his temper in check. He said, "Come on," and moved out of the circle of firelight. Hatchell called Arne Simpson and Tom Bellingham to go with him and followed.

There was a good deal of whispering among those left around the fire. Mrs. Hatchell said that Katherine Lowell wasn't a thief and had never worked in St. Louis. She said the girl was from Boston. Saul Rusk who was seated near Mark commented on the pearl necklace. Bruce Knowland, one of the older men in the company, said that if Overton could afford a pearl necklace worth a fortune, he could also afford to lose it. Knowland nearly always had a book in his hand. He had brought a box of books with him and he had one tonight. He had been reading it by the firelight before the singing started. Mark had noticed the title and author. The book was *The Advancement of Learning,* by Francis Bacon.

THE search of the wagons was quickly finished and Overton and his two companions rode off. Hatchell, Arne Simpson and Tom Bellingham came back to the fire but Tom didn't play any more and the edge of the evening was gone. People started drifting toward their wagons for an early rest, for tomorrow would be a hard day.

Mark sat near the fire with Tom Bellingham. Saul Rusk left in the direction of town and a probable last drunk. He didn't even bother to walk Mary, his wife, back to their wagon. Mark noticed how Mary tried to seem unaware of Saul's departture and how she went on talking with his mother though her face had tightened up

and she couldn't hide her worry. Tom kept watching Mary, too, and Tom was scowling. Tom's wife was dead. He was making this journey with his motherless son.

Arne Simpson came up and asked Mark and Tom if they had seen Norah, but neither of them had seen her for some time. Arne said he guessed she was already in bed. He said that a little doubtfully and he didn't go to his wagon to find out. Mark Hatchell stared into the flames of the dying fire suddenly aware of the fact that the hazards which faced them on the trail wouldn't be limited to Indian troubles, drouth, accident, illness or famine. The matter of the relationships of the people in this company to each other might also be one of the hazards of the journey.

After the third night's encampment, when supper was finished, Henry Hatchell called a meeting of the entire company.

"Some of you remember the trouble we had our last night in Westport Landing," he began. "A young woman had come to our camp and wanted to join us. She left during the afternoon. We told the men who were hunting her that she had headed for Indepence, and that was true. But because I asked him to, Sam Shem met her and found her a temporary place in the wagon train ahead of us.

"My proposition is this. The story those men told about her was untrue. She's a fine, decent woman and my wife is willing to have her join our party if no one here objects. If any of you don't like it, now's the time to talk."

There was a moment of silence and then a buzz of conversation and a good many quiet chuckles at the thought of the way the three men who had been hunting the girl had been fooled.

"Who is she, Henry?" Saul Rusk asked. "What do you know about her?"

"Why, not much more than I know about you, Saul," Hatchell answered. "She's from Boston. She is of a good family. She is willing to do her share just as any of the rest of us. You will all get to know her as time goes on. What she wants to tell of herself she will probably tell. We haven't asked anyone here too many personal questions and I don't think we should ask too many of her."

"No one followed the rest of us and tried to stop us," Saul Rusk suggested grimly.

"Maybe the sheriff didn't know which way you had gone, Saul," Henry Hatchell grinned.

There was a laugh at this and afterwards Bruce Knowland said that he had no objections to Katherine Lowell joining the company. Others agreed. There were no dissenting votes.

Sam Shem had brought the girl back to the encampment with him, arriving just after dark, and now Mrs. Hatchell brought her to the circle around the fire. She was wearing a dress and bonnet, just as the other women were. Mark, staring at her, knew that he would never have recognized her as the same person who had come to their camp at Westport Landing. She was taller than she had seemed in boy's clothing, and much older.

The women gathered around her at once and after a while the men were introduced. Mark noticed that Saul Rusk was one of the first men to push forward and his welcome to the girl was as hearty as it could have been. Mark met the girl a good while later. He liked the tone of her voice, the firm clasp of her hand, the clear, steady look in her dark eyes. In fact, he had a feeling that if he wasn't careful he might grow to like her a good deal too much.

The return of Katherine Lowell to the company and the mystery surrounding her furnished a topic for speculation for the next two days. Katherine, herself, had very little to say to anyone and if she talked to Mrs. Hatchell or any of the women, they held her confidences to themselves. Rob Wagner, who was in his early twenties and unmarried, announced quite definitely that he had honorable intentions so far as Katherine Lowell was concerned, but he had difficulty in seeing her alone. During the day's ride she sat in the Hatchell wagon, relieving Mrs. Hatchell at the reins. At the encamepment she was busy with supper, or the dishes, or in helping Mrs. Stockton with her babies. She sat with the women around the fire at night and went to bed quite early.

MARK rode ahead with Sam Shem sometimes to pick and mark the nooning place and select the site for the night's encampment. And they often ranged far ahead of the place chosen and wide of the

trail to watch for signs of any considerable movement of Indians. It was too early, probably, to expect trouble, but this constant caution was a part of Sam Shem's make-up.

They returned to the encampment one evening long after sundown and tired from miles of riding. This night marked the beginning of their third week on the trail and so far all had gone well. Mark slept with his father close to the wagon which Mrs. Hatchell and Katherine used to bed down in. On cold and rainy nights Mark and his father put up a tent but to-night was clear and the tent wasn't set up.

After he had cared for his horse Mark got his bed-roll and spread it out. He lay down and stared up at the stars. From the direction of the campfire he could hear the murmur of voices and he turned his head that way, suddenly wondering if any food had been saved and if it would be worth the effort to find out.

A woman left the campfire and moved in his direction, a woman with a slender, erect figure. Katherine Lowell, he decided. As she drew near him a man who had moved around from the far side of the fire hurried after her and called her name. The woman stopped and looked back.

"I've been wantin' to see you, girlie," said the man as he came up. "You're just too high-falootin' for a place like this. You gotta be more friendly."

The girl's voice was very quiet, very calm. "I've tried to be friendly, Mr. Rusk. I'm sorry if I haven't succeeded."

Saul Rusk laughed. "I guess you'll do all right if you only thaw out a bit. Why don't you and me take a walk. Just a little walk."

"I'm rather tired, Mr. Rusk."

"Aw, come on."

The girl shook her head. "I'd rather not, honestly." She turned away but Rusk reached out and caught her arm and pulled her toward him. Mark sat up but he didn't get to his feet. Katherine's arm swung in a low blow toward Rusk's face and the sound of the slap was clearly audible. At the same moment she twisted away and started running back toward the campfire. After a few steps she slowed down to a walk.

Saul Rusk stared after her, smoothing a hand over his face. "By God, you'll be sorry for that," he said under his breath. "There won't always be a campfire to run to." He turned and angled toward his wagon.

Mark Hatchell came to his feet, aware of a sudden fear of what this man might do. He knew Saul Rusk pretty well, knew his attitude toward women and knew something of the ruthless nature of the man and of his insufferable egotism. He wouldn't forget the way Katherine had turned him down. He wouldn't forget the slap on the face. And he was right. There would be opportunities in the days ahead for him to corner Katherine when a campfire or other help might not be so handy.

Rusk was nearing his wagon when Mark caught up with him and the man turned when Mark called his name. In the half light from the sky Mark could see the ugly scowl he was wearing. His spirits were still smarting, too, from what had happened for his voice and words showed it. "Well, what do you want?" he demanded.

"I was back there by our wagon when you stopped Katherine Lowell," Mark said quietly. "I heard and saw all that happened."

"What if you did?"

"Why just this, Rusk. I thought I'd tell you that if you ever laid a finger on Katherine Lowell again I'd beat you to death. I mean that, Rusk. I mean every word of it. You've got a wife, a pretty fine wife. Leave Katherine alone."

There was a sneer in Rusk's answer. "So she's your property, huh?"

Mark shook his head. "Nothing of the sort, but leave her alone."

Saul Rusk moved a step closer. "By God, no one can give me orders," he grated. "No one."

"I'm giving you an order," Mark snapped, "And you'll take it."

"Like hell I will!"

Rusk took another step forward and swung his fist at Mark's face and there was no chance now to avoid a fight. Mark blocked the blow and struck back. He stabbed out at Rusk again and connected solidly but Rusk was short and heavy and built close to the ground and the blow didn't seem to bother him. He plowed in at Mark slugging with both fists. Suddenly, then, men were all around them and two

fellows were holding back a raging Saul Rusk who kept trying to pull free.

Lanterns were brought and Henry Hatchell stepped between Rusk and his son and demanded an explanation.

"What caused this?" Saul Rusk answered grimly. "Hell, what would you do if you came back to your wagon an' found someone pawin' through it like a thief. What would you do, Hatchell?"

A STARTLED silence had fallen over the men who surrounded them. Mark knew that he was flushing. "That's a lie," he said bluntly. "Every word of it's a lie."

"It's no lie at all," Rusk shouted. "I found him on the wagon and threw him out. Turn me free and I'll finish what I started."

Henry Hatchell looked at his son. "What were you doing here, Mark?" he demanded.

The explanation was on the tip of Mark's tongue and he knew that if he gave it Katherine Lowell would support him. But he couldn't use the truth. Beyond the circle of men he could see Mary Rusk, Saul Rusk's wife. She had suffered enough back in Westport Landing through the acts of her husband. He couldn't strip her of what pride she had left. He shook his head and looked his father straight in the eye.

"It's an old quarrel," he said slowly. "I saw Rusk leave the fire and I followed him here. I was never in my life in his wagon."

"I caught him in it and threw him out," Saul Rusk grated.

It was one man's word against another. Mark knew that his reputation with the others in the camp was strong in his favor. But the whole matter was inconclusive. His explanation was weak. There were some who would wonder where the truth lay.

"Mark is your son, Henry," said Bruce Knowland. "If you have to decide this there are some who will say you were prejudiced. Suppose the rest of us decide it."

"Go ahead," said Henry Hatchell.

"Then I vote we drop it," said Bruce Knowland. "We can't know for sure which man speaks the truth and any decision against one or the other might be wrong. If Mark is a thief he'll try stealing again and sooner or later he'll be caught. If Rusk is not telling the truth he will lie again and one of these days one of his lies will catch up with him. Time renders its decisions more justly than men."

This suggestion seemed to appeal to nearly everyone and looking back on this scene later, Mark was to decide that Knowland's growth in influence among the men of the company, really dated from this night. Bruce Knowland had few qualities of leadership, but he was studious, thoughtful and had a rare understanding of men.

Still muttering threats as to what he was going to do, Saul Rusk was led away and Mark turned back toward his father's wagon. He told his father, after swearing him to secrecy, just what had happened and why he hadn't talked and when he had finished his father shook his head. He looked worried.

"Mary Rusk has talked to your mother," he said slowly. "She thinks that Saul will straighten up when he gets away from liquor, but I don't know. He's a mean one, son. Keep your eyes open."

The rumors started the next morning. Saul Rusk claimed to be missing a hundred dollars in gold which had been hidden in his wagon. He told some of the men that he should have insisted on searching Mark Hatchell and he said that he meant to get the gold back. To some, this strengthened Saul Rusk's story. But others, knowing how low on funds he had been in Westport Landing, discounted his claim. Nevertheless, the story was passed around until everyone in the company had heard it.

Mark had one brief session with Saul Rusk in view of a good many others but within the sound of none.

"You're clever, Rusk," he admitted. "Awfully clever. But what I said before still goes. Keep away from Katherine Lowell."

Saul Rusk laughed at him. "She'll be eating out of my hand in less than a week. Keep away from her yourself."

CHAPTER THREE

Kidnapers Ride by Night

THE next day the caravan laid over to make repairs on several wagons and Mark Hatchell rode out with Sam Shem

on a hunting trip. There was a hilly country behind them and a little south of the trail, a country, according to the scout, good for hunting. Late in the afternoon, Mark spurred ahead of Sam Shem and from a narrow pass in the hills sighted what he thought was an elk, far ahead.

Mark considered the possibility of getting closer before shooting but he was afraid the animal would sight him and disappear in the thick foliage on the hill. He lifted his carbine and sighted carefully along the barrel and then squeezed the trigger. The elk gave one startled jump and then collapsed.

Mark heard someone coming up behind him and he pointed ahead and shouted, "Look Sam. There's a real shot for you. There's—"

He broke off as something jabbed him in the back and he looked around. It wasn't Sam Shem who had come up. It was Overton—bearded now—and holding a revolver against him.

"How about a shot for you, Hatchell," Overton said grimly. "Where is she? I want the truth this time."

Mark Hatchell stared at the man, hardly believing his eyes. He had almost forgotten about Overton. He had never expected to see the man again. Where he had come from so suddenly Mark couldn't even guess. Later he was to learn that Overton had been on a short cut through these hills from the trail which twisted around and behind them.

"Where is she?" the bearded man asked again.

The crack of a gun sounded from somewhere behind them and Overton's hat sailed from his head. The man ducked and his revolver went off but Mark had twisted out of the way. He swung his carbine at Overton's head but Overton's horse was moving off and the blow missed. Then Overton was bent over the saddle and was galloping away.

Sam Shem who had fired the shot at Overton came riding up. "I could have got him," the scout growled. "Somehow, though, I don't like to shoot white men. If he had been an Injun—"

Mark stared ahead. He wondered what this would mean to Katherine Lowell. He wondered what Overton meant to do, what he could do. He forgot about the shot he had just made, the shot he had been so anxious to point out to Sam Shem.

When he and Sam Shem got back to the encampment it was after sundown and his father was waiting for him.

"Let's take a walk, son," said Henry Hatchell. "I want to talk to you."

Mark turned his horse over to Sam Shem and followed his father through the darkness. Some little distance from the wagons the older man stopped.

"Mark," he said slowly, "you've never asked me or your mother to tell you about Katherine Lowell."

Mark shook his head.

"But you've talked to her. Has she ever told you why she is here, why she ran away?"

"I never asked her. She's never told me."

"Then you'd better hear the story, Mark. She's from Boston. Her mother's name, before she was married, was Charity Harlow, and your mother knew her. Charity Harlow married Richard Lowell who is quite a prominent man in Boston. He owns a good many ships, has quite an importing business. Some time ago he made a deal with Arthur Overton, whom you met and had the fight with in Westport Landing. I don't know the details of the arrangement between them but Overton apparently got the upper hand and agreed to settle things fairly if he could marry Lowell's daughter. There was some paper involved, a paper which Overton held as a threat to Richard Lowell.

"As your mother tells it, Katherine at first refused, but finally gave in and agreed to marry Overton in return for the paper. She held to her bargain and married him. Richard Lowell got the paper the day the marriage was performed and that same day, Katherine ran away. She left a note for Overton saying that she had married him as agreed, but that she had not agreed to live with him and never would. She went to New York, to Philadelphia, to Pittsburgh and then down the Ohio. Overton followed her. It's not so difficult to follow the trail of an attractive girl who is alone and running away from something, especially when you get away from the big cities. And it's easy to understand why he followed her even though she despises him, for through Katherine Lowell he has a hold on her

father's fortune. Lowell has no other children."

Mark Hatchell was frowning. "I should have known all that. I should have known it in Westport and she wouldn't have to worry about him any more."

"The reason I've told you this, Mark," Henry Hatchell said, "is that Overton is here now!"

Mark started. "Has he talked to Katherine?"

"To Katherine and to me and your mother and a good many other people."

"Everyone knows this story?"

"I don't think so. He wanted Katherine to ride east with him. He said it was safe. Katherine refused and I told him that so far as I was concerned she could go along with us. He talked of his rights as her husband but I wouldn't recognize them. He said he would put the matter up to the entire company and stalked away. A little while later Saul Rusk came to me and told me that Arthur Overton was joining him and his wife and going along with us. Rusk said he had extra food and it was within his right to give Overton a place. I don't know what Overton told him or anyone else."

"So that's the way it stands," Mark said slowly.

"That's the way it stands and I wanted you to know all this before you did anything reckless."

"Those in the company know that Overton was following Katherine. What do they think of it."

"They probably haven't recognized him as the man who came to the camp in Westport Landing. He only mentioned his name once that night and then not clearly. He's dressed differently, now. He has leather jeans and a leather shirt and has grown a beard. Not many will identify him."

"You think he really means to go to Oregon with us?"

"I don't know, son, but I want you to be careful. Rusk has no reason to love you and neither does Overton."

Mark's lips tightened. He said, "I'll be careful—just as long as I can. Thanks, dad, for what you've told me."

SUPPER was over and a good many of the company had gathered around the fire. Ben walked that way. He called a greeting to Tom Bellingham and asked if there was anything left to eat. One of the women got him a plate and some food from a pan which had been kept close to the fire.

Saul Rusk, who was seated not far away, got to his feet and said, "Hey, Mark. I want you to meet Art Overton. He's joined up with Mary an' me. He just caught up with us today."

There was a narrow, watchful look in Rusk's eyes. The bearded man who had been seated beside him stood up and nodded. He said, "Glad to meet you, Hatchell."

From one side, Katherine Lowell was watching this closely, her hands tightly clasped in her lap. Mark was very much aware of this as he returned Overton's greeting. His tone was very casual.

"I might add," said Overton dryly, "that I didn't bring anything of value with me."

This was so direct a reference to what had happened the night before and to Saul Rusk's charges that he had caught Mark Hatchell in his wagon that not a person there could have missed it.

Mark held a tight check on the sudden anger that swept through him. "You don't look as though you had brought anything of value with you," he said bluntly. "And if you ever had anything of value, you've lost it."

Arthur Overton got his meaning, at least. The man took a step toward him, then stopped. He managed a laugh which didn't sound very natural. "We've lots of time to see about that," he answered. "It's still quite a few miles to the Oregon country."

Mark shrugged and turned back to the fire. He saw Tom Bellingham staring in Overton's direction and scowling and he noticed that Bruce Knowland was also looking that way.

Saul Rusk and Overton left after a time and Mark persuaded Tom Bellingham to get out his fiddle. Tom played it for a while, but not for long and when he had finished and was about to put it away, Katherine Lowell got to her feet and asked Tom if she could play it. She played an air Mark had never before heard. It was a song with a gentle, strange melody.

"What is that, Katherine?" he asked when she finished.

"It's by a man named Schubert," Kath-

erine replied. "It's part of the *Rosamunde Overture.* This is by Schubert, too. It's called *Serenade.*"

Mark thought he had never before heard anything so beautiful. He hadn't imagined that Katherine could play the fiddle. He stared at her thoughtfully, thinking of what her life must have been like back in Boston and how different it was here."

"I'll never want to play this again," said Tom as she handed back the fiddle. "I wouldn't dare."

Katherine shook her head. "You can really play better than I can, and more usefully. You can play songs people can sing. I don't know them."

Katherine sat down by Tom and they started talking but Tom kept looking across the fire toward Mary Rusk. Mark had noticed that he always sat where he could watch Mary. He wondered how plain this was to others, or to Mary, for that matter.

After a time Katherine left and Mark walked back with her to the wagon.

"Where did you learn to play?" he asked her.

"Back home," Katherine answered. "I started when I was just a little girl. I hated it. I had to practise for hours when I wanted to be climbing trees or throwing rocks or doing all the things a nice little girl shouldn't."

Mark's mother and father were still at the campfire and it was very dark and still over here at the wagon. Mark leaned against the wheel. He said, "Katherine, no, Kathy, I like that better. Kathy, what will you do about Overton?"

The girl shook her head. "Nothing."

"He can make himself very unpleasant."

"Then I shall have to run away again."

"There's no place to run from here, Kathy."

"Perhaps I shall have to stay here then and be unpleasant myself. I will never give in to him."

"And when you get to Oregon?"

"I'll find work of some kind. Perhaps there will be a need of school teachers. I could do that. Or teach music. Or even work in a store."

"Overton is a stubborn, persistent man, Kathy."

The girl laughed softly. She said, "So am I stubborn and persistent, Mark. We are away from where Arthur Overton is strong and important. This is a different world."

Mark thought he heard a sound from behind the next wagon and he listened for a moment but the sound wasn't repeated. Kathy put out her hand and said, "Good night, Mark, and thanks for all you have done."

MARK held her hand for a moment then watched her climb into the wagon. He started toward his tent, but stopped as he saw a man approaching him from the side, and every nerve in his body was suddenly sharpened to the possibility of trouble. This was Saul Rusk and it wasn't like Rusk to just want a word with him.

"I think you and me have got some things to talk over, Mark," Saul Rusk said as he came up to where Mark was standing. "It's better to do it here."

"What things?" Mark asked bluntly.

"Well, Overton, for one. And his wife. And what we're going to do about it."

Mark's eyes narrowed. He said, "What would you suggest, Rusk? What is there for us to do? Where do you fit into this, anyhow?"

"Well, maybe there's a lot of money involved."

"Money's not worth much where we're going."

"But we're not there yet. Maybe we'll never get there. Listen to this. Suppose you an' me—"

Rusk was talking fast and his voice had raised a little. Mark heard the sound of a footstep behind him. He sensed a blur of motion and he jerked around, lifting his arms toward his head. But he wasn't in time. Something smashed against the side of his skull and he knew that he was falling. He wasn't aware of hitting the ground. Unconsciousness came too swiftly.

It was still dark when he opened his eyes again. Men were bending over him, one of them with a lantern. His face and shoulders were wet with the water someone had slopped from a bucket and there was a blinding, stabbing pain in his head. He sat up, someone helping him, and he closed his eyes against an almost overpowering dizziness.

"Take it easy, son," Henry Hatchell was saying. "You don't have to get up right away."

Mark looked at the men gathered around him. Saul Rusk wasn't here and neither was Overton. He couldn't be sure but he was pretty positive that it had been Overton who had come up behind him while Saul Rusk had been talking to him. Only what was the reason for it? Why had they—? Abruptly it came to him. He had taken Kathy to the wagon but hadn't left her there alone. He had started for the tent he and his father used and if Overton and Rusk had planned to make trouble for Kathy, he would have been where he could hear them. They had to get him out of the way.

He got unsteadily to his feet. "Where's Kathy?" he asked "Katherine Lowell."

"Why she's gone to bed, Mark," his father answered.

"Make sure of it, will you?" Mark insisted.

His father walked over to their wagon and called the girl. After a moment he looked inside. He came back asking, "Have any of you seen Katherine since she left the campfire. She's not in the wagon."

No one had seen her.

"Where's Rusk and Overton?" Mark asked.

No one had seen them recently, either. Mary Rusk didn't know where her husband was. There was a hopeless, defeated look on her face.

A complete search was made of the encampment. Saul Rusk, Overton and Kathy Lowell were missing. Three of the horses were gone. Word that Kathy Lowell was Overton's wife had leaked out and it was easy to figure that Overton and Kathy Lowell had deserted the caravan and turned back east and that for some reason or other, Saul Rusk had gone with them, just walking out on his wife. Mark could see it all more clearly. Kathy hadn't gone willingly, he knew. Overton had talked Rusk into helping him, probably through the promise of a rich reward.

"I'm going after them," Mark said to his father. I'm going to bring her back."

Henry Hatchell shook his head. "You're doing nothing of the sort, son. You are needed here. Every man here has his job. You can't desert the caravan."

"You tried to help her escape from him once," Mark said bitterly. "What's the matter with you now?"

"I can't think only of her, Mark. I've got to think of the entire company. If we had time, if we could stop and turn back and if the men voted to do so it would be different. But suppose we put it up to them. What would they decide? After all, Katherine Lowell is married to Overton."

"She never lived with him. She never will."

"Perhaps not, but what right has she given you to interfere?"

"I'm assuming the right."

Henry Hatchell shook his head. He said, "Mark, I'm ordering you not to leave the caravan."

"And I'm leaving," Mark said bluntly. "Try and stop me."

He turned abruptly away and headed for the place where the horses were corralled. Someone followed him and he looked around when he got there, anticipating another argument with his father. It was Tom Bellingham, however, who joined him.

"Count me in this, too," Tom said quietly. "I've got to know about Saul Rusk. I've got to know for Mary—and maybe for myself."

Mark hesitated, then nodded his head.

Back at the Hatchell wagon, Henry Hatchell was talking to his wife. "I tried to stop him, Edith," he told her. "I ordered him to stay with the caravan but he wouldn't. I'm worried about what will happen."

"You knew, of course, that he wouldn't stay."

"Yes, I suppose I did."

"They're dangerous men, aren't they, Henry?"

"More dangerous, I'm afraid, than Mark appreciates. I've got to follow him, Edith."

"But you can't. You're the leader of the caravan."

"Bruce Knowland can lead it. Someone else can lead it. Edith, this is something I've got to do. I'll catch up with you as soon as I can. You explain to the others."

CHAPTER FOUR

Crawfish or Die!

IT WAS sundown of the next day and from the shelter of a screen of bushes lining the Platte river, Mark Hatchell and Tom Bellingham watched the three mounted

figures moving along the trail and drawing ever closer. Mark and Tom Bellingham had ridden hard to reach this point. They had circled south of the trail and had kept pushing their horses until they were sure they were ahead of the three they had set out to follow. Then they had moved back up the river, keeping hidden from the trail which at this point paralleled the Platte.

Mark had been sure that Overton and Rusk would keep to the trail. It was the only safe plan for them. And though they had had a two hour's start, he thought that with Kathy along they couldn't go as fast as he and Tom Bellingham. He hadn't been positive of this, however, until a few moments before when they had sighted the three moving figures.

"They've probably been riding pretty steady since last night," Tom suggested. "Maybe they bought some food from one of the caravans behind ours. They're bound to stop after a while and make camp. They can't keep going all night."

Mark nodded. He kept watching the three mounted figures. As they drew closer he could distinguish Saul Rusk on the far side, and Overton on the near side. Kathy rode between them. Overton was holding the reins of her horse.

"What do we do?" Tom asked.

"Let them make camp," Mark said bluntly. "Let them make camp then join them for a little talk."

"It won't be pleasant."

"Maybe it won't."

The three moving along the trail passed the place where Mark and Tom Bellingham were waiting and a little farther on, turned in toward the river and stopped in the shelter of some tall cottonwood trees. Mark and Tom Bellingham tied their horses where they were and moved down the river on foot. Without knowing it they passed Henry Hatchell—a Henry Hatchell who had followed them half by guess and half by luck, and who watched them thoughtfully.

A fire had been started in a wide open space in the grove of trees where people had camped before. From the edge of the clearing, Mark watched the two men starting supper. Kathy sat on a blanket some distance away. Mark could hear the murmur of the men's voices.

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The shadows of the approaching night were beginning to thicken. The two men had gathered quite a pile of wood. They probably meant to keep this fire burning and Mark realized how foolish they were. All through this country there were Indians and though no mass attacks had been made on any of the caravans so far as Mark knew, here was a perfect invitation for some small marauding group of red men. The fire would serve as a beacon.

Mark turned to Tom Bellingham. "Let's get our talk started," he said abruptly. "Keep your carbine on Saul Rusk. I'll watch Overton."

"Do we just walk out there?" Tom asked.

"No. You wait here. I'll get around to the other side. You close in from here when you see me.",

Tom Bellingham nodded and Mark hurried away. He skirted the sandy bank of the river, then turned back in toward the camp. And suddenly he stopped, his attention caught by the sound of a snapping twig. His eyes turned from side to side. The shrubbery here was quite thick and he could see nothing else. He considered the possibility of Indians and a shiver of apprehension ran up and down his back.

For perhaps a full minute Mark didn't move. He listened for some other noise, some noise which didn't belong here, but he heard nothing and finally he moved on again, pushing his way carefully through the bushes and thick undergrowth. Something suddenly prodded him in the back and Mark jerked erect and half turned.

"Stand right where you are," said a harsh, sharp voice. "Drop that carbine!"

Mark dropped his gun. He recognized this voice and he looked around now and saw Overton standing just behind him prodding him with a carbine. There was a pail at Overton's feet. The man had come this way for water, had seen him approaching and had stayed hidden until he passed. There was a mocking smile on the man's lips.

"I'm glad you followed us," Overton said grimly. "We've got something to settle, you and I, and this is as good a place for it as any. No, don't turn around. Just stand there."

MARK HATCHELL didn't move. He was close to death and he knew it. Overton's finger was on the trigger of the carbine. A slight pressure of his finger and the gun would explode. Mark tasted deep of the bitterness of despair. He had walked into this like a fool. He had had his warning that someone was here but hadn't heeded it. He could expect no help from Tom Bellingham. This was the end.

"I'd like to indulge in another fight with you, Hatchell," Overton said bluntly, "But I've no time for it. I've time for this, however."

As he spoke, Overton whipped up his gun and slashed at Mark's head. Mark jerked sideways. The barrel of the gun missed his head but struck him heavily in the shoulder. He half turned, clawing at Overton and caught the man's wrist. He jerked the man toward him. Overton lashed out with his foot and caught Mark in the stomach. He pulled away and hit at him again with the barrel of the carbine.

Mark went down under this blow. He rolled over and got to his knees and grabbed for Overton's legs and pulled the man to the ground. He saw his own carbine, now, just where he had dropped it and he twisted away and picked it up and covered Overton who was just getting to his feet.

"Turn around, Overton," he ordered. "Start back to the camp."

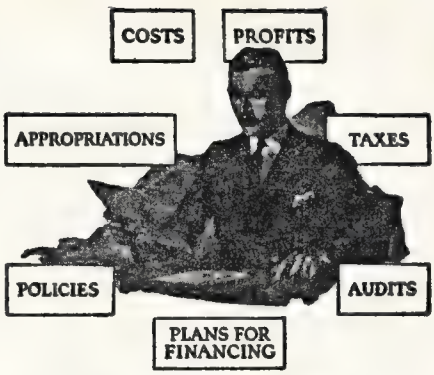
His head was reeling from the blow that had dropped him and his legs didn't feel any too steady, but he was still alive. He was still alive and he had a chance, once more, to do what he had planned.

"Back to camp," he said sharply. "Get started, now!"

Overton was breathing heavily. He looked at his own gun on the ground at his feet and he looked at Mark, his eyes dark and thoughtful and he turned abruptly and started plodding toward the camp.

Saul Rusk saw him coming and looked up and called, "Hey, where's the water?" Then Rusk caught sight of Mark Hatchell and he stiffened and sucked in a quick, sharp breath.

Rusk took a step toward where his gun was standing but didn't reach for it. He had caught sight, now, of Tom Bellingham who had moved into the clearing and Belling-



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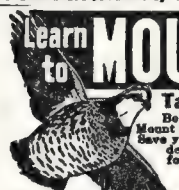

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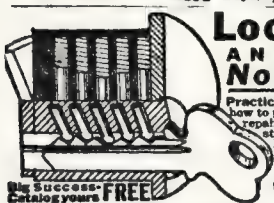

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ham's carbine was pointed straight at him.

Overton moved up close to the fire and then turned to face Mark Hatchell. "What do I do now?" he asked flatly.

"Just stand there where you are until we've decided about Kathy," Mark answered. He lifted his voice. "Kathy, do you want to go east with these men."

The girl moved forward and there was a welcome in her eyes which gave Mark a warm, intimate feeling. She shook her head. "I want to go back to the caravan."

"Katherine is my wife," said Overton sharply. "She goes with me."

Mark grinned at the man. "Haven't you heard, Overton? This is a free country. Kathy goes where—"

Saul Rusk's hands were at his side and suddenly one of them whipped up and Mark caught the glint of light on the blade of a knife. Tom Bellingham shouted a warning and Marked twisted his carbine toward Rusk and pressed the trigger. The bullet from his gun caught Saul Rusk in the chest, turned him half around and sent him to the ground but the knife he had reached for had already been thrown.

A sharp cry broke from Tom Bellingham's lips but Mark didn't know what had happened or where the knife had hit him for Overton, taking full advantage of this moment, was suddenly on him. A smashing blow in the face drove Mark backwards.

Mark dropped the carbine he had fired. He steadied himself and swung both fists at Overton as the man rushed in at him. For a moment they stood toe to toe, slugging it out, neither of them giving ground. This was a repeat of the fight back at Westport Landing, a continuation of the fight which had started just outside this camp, but it was more vicious, more brutal. They were well matched. Overton was the heavier and probably had more strength but Mark was more wiry, harder. A blow to the side of the jaw staggered him and he backed away, circling the fire. Then as his head cleared he moved in and caught Overton under the chin and again in the face and Overton went down.

He rolled to his knees and got up and came charging in at Mark with new strength. Mark couldn't stop him, couldn't block his blows. Under the constant weight

of them he went down. He rolled away from a kick aimed at his head and from another and got to his knees. He got up, covering his face and burying his head in his arms. Then he smashed back jolting blows of his own and this time it was Overton who went down.

The man got up quickly and suddenly now there was a knife in his hand. It slashed viciously at Mark's face and then again at him as Mark backed away. In the fading light of the day he could see the twisted snarl on Overton's lips and the man's ugly look. This was no fight any longer. It was a life and death struggle.

Mark drew back again, then stepped in and caught Overton's wrist as the man lunged at him with the knife. He caught Overton's wrist with both hands, twisting it and throwing the full weight of his body against the man's arm. Overton went down with Mark on top of him, but he didn't drop the knife. Mark bent the arm over one of his legs and suddenly Overton was screaming and there was the snapping sound of a bone and all of the tension went out of Overton's body.

MARK got slowly to his feet. Overton was still screaming and now was rolling from side to side. Mark kicked the knife he had dropped. He looked over to where Saul Rusk had fallen. Saul Rusk was on his face and without examining him, Mark knew the man was dead. Tom Bellingham was sitting up, holding his shoulder. Blood was oozing through his fingers.

"I—couldn't shoot him, Mark," Tom said thickly. "He was Mary's husband. I got to

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thinking about that. I can't explain to you but I just couldn't shoot him."

A cry of warning reached Mark's ears from the gathering darkness beyond the fire and he jerked around as a gun out there exploded. Behind him, a little ways, Overton sank slowly to his knees, a carbine dropping it from his left hand. He had rolled to where the gun was standing, had picked it up in his one good hand and had aimed it at Mark. A shot from the darkness had reached him before he could pull the trigger.

"Never turn your back on a man like Overton, son," advised Henry Hatchell as he moved into the circle of light. "You can sometimes lose a fight after you've won it. You almost did. How's Tom's shoulder?"

Henry Hatchell moved that way while Mark stared at him in amazement, not understanding where he had come from but suddenly glad that he was here. Glad not only because of that shot which had saved his life but because his father had followed him and stood back of him in something which to Mark Hatchell was awfully important.

Kathy was a huddled figure on the ground, her hands covering her face. She didn't look up when Mark spoke to her.

"I didn't want it like this," Mark heard her say. "Why did he have to follow me? Why did this have to happen? Why, Mark? Why?"

Mark had no answer for the girl. She would have a hard time forgetting what had happened here, he knew. But there were long days ahead and Kathy Lowell had the strength to face this and whatever the future might hold.

"Tom's shoulder wound isn't serious," Mark heard his father saying. "And in spite of it and how tired Katherine must be, we've got to ride back to the closest caravan tonight. We can't stay here. Let's do what has to be done, son, and then ride."

There was a double grave to be dug and Mark knew that his father would insist on a simple service, for such was Henry Hatchell's way. With tightened lips, Mark turned to the disagreeable task which his father had set.

Seated near the campfire, Henry Hatchell made his nightly entry in his journal:

3rd, 1845.

We are camped tonight within ten miles of Fort Laramie. For the past few days all has gone well. Mrs. Stockton's baby was sick again but is better. The wound in Tom Bellingham's shoulder is much improved. Edith, today, called my attention to the care which Mary Rusk has given it, never knowing the wound was caused by her husband, whom she understands was killed in a fight with Overton. May God forgive me for that untruth which I thought important. Mary believes that her husband, at the end, played the part of the man she hoped he would some day be, and this belief did much to restore her pride and to help her face others. It has harmed no one. Edith, who is very discerning, has also pointed out that Mary Rusk and Tom Bellingham are deeply interested in each other. They are both fine people. I could think of no better solution for either of them. Mark and Kathy Lowell talked with me last evening asking my approval of their marriage when we reach Fort Laramie. I suggested that they wait a while longer but I have probably been too harsh with them. They are well suited to each other and there is little point in delay. My fears concerning Kathy Lowell were groundless. The violence we experienced was not of her making. She is kind and considerate and I am satisfied could remain unmarried and still not inspire any jealousy or gossip which would be harmful. We shall spend perhaps several days at Fort Laramie in rest and in making repairs to our wagons and equipment. God has been good to us thus far on our perilous journey.'

Henry Hatchell looked up from his journal. Across the fire, Mark and Kathy and Tom and Mary Rusk were seated together. Kathy was playing Tom's fiddle, was playing that strange air written by some European. The four young people were all smiling. They looked as though they had no fears for the days ahead.

THE END

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DUE southwest the Santa Fe Trail ran, through Council Grove, Fort Zarah, Pawnee Rock, and Fort Dodge to the famous Cimarron Crossing. It was a hot, dusty grind with hard prairie and dusty desert for a bed and a dark star-clustered sky overhead. Once past Dodge City the Trail lay along the Cimarron River, passed through San Miguel, and came to an end at Santa Fe.

Historic Santa Fe! At first sight the old city was not much to look at—drab 'dobe buildings, pigs and cattle roaming through the streets, little dirty-faced Mexican children shouting and pulling at the tails of the dusty oxen that plodded down the main street pulling the arriving wagons. But the bullwhackers had little eyes for these things. Instead their eyes lingered on the slim, bronzed girls who walked gracefully through the streets, their gazes studiously on the ground before them. No well-bred Spanish girl would stare at an unintroduced gringo.

But at night all that was changed. At night there would be a fandango to which everyone was invited—and there would be dancing and laughter, and perhaps if the trail-weary gringo made a good impression on the chaperons who accompanied the girls, there would be further calls on these pretty senoritas.

In other ways, though, the Santa Fe Trail was more than a dusty path through the desert wilderness. It was more than a road to Mexico. For while those trail-weary mule drivers and bullwhackers danced and drank, while they courted and made love to the sloe-eyed senoritas, they were, in more ways than they realized, conquerors. They were the beginning o tide that was flowing to the Southw that would soon sweep the Mexican ernment far south, and that would co those little Mexican children, wh naked through the dusty streets, int icans. The Santa Fe trail wa —a spearhead pointed at the was later to be New Mexico, a to carry behind it a new gov Yankee government—and a new for all the border country.

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